
Housing Deprivation Unravelling: Application of the Capability Approach

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➤ **Abstract** *The capability approach as a normative approach to wellbeing focuses on the real freedoms of people to choose the life they want to live (Sen, 1999). This approach is regarded as an alternative to the needs-based approach of paternalistic welfare states in Europe and seems to match well with the ambitions of the European Commission ‘to show a more social face’ and the Dutch government to make the participation society work.*

The RE-InVEST project¹ aimed to both advance theoretical thinking as well as empirical testing of the capability approach. The RE-InVEST philosopher team developed an application of three anthropological roles that a human being can adopt: the doer, the receiver and the judge (Bonvin and Laruffa, 2017a; Bonvin and Laruffa 2017b). We explored this approach among Rotterdam

¹ This text is based on work in the RE-InVEST (Rebuilding an inclusive, value based Europe of solidarity and trust through social investments) project, which was funded by the European Union’s Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under Grant Agreement No 649447 (<http://www.re-invest.eu/>). It aimed to develop an alternative ‘more social’ way of welfare thinking in the European Union applying the concepts of human rights, capabilities and social investments in several service sectors, such as health care and housing, in case studies in 13 jurisdictions.

The country report about this case study is available on the RE-InVEST website: http://www.re-invest.eu/images/docs/reports/D6.1_Netherlands_EIND.pdf. An earlier version of this text was presented at the 2018 European Network of Housing Research conference ‘More together, more apart: Migration, densification, segregation’, 27-29 June, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden.

This last version of the text benefited from very helpful peer reviewing.

citizens who had difficulties making ends meet. These vulnerable participants were able to indicate in which roles they had become more vulnerable in recent years and in which roles they identified opportunities of reducing their situation of housing deprivation. The capability approach as elaborated in the three roles allows for housing policies to start from the definition of wellbeing of the individual instead of from 'paternalistic' policy aims, which are mostly based on countering monetary deprivation.

► **Keywords** _ *Anthropological roles, capabilities, doer, housing, judge, receiver, The Netherlands, vulnerability*

Introduction

Since the 1980s, Dutch housing policy moved towards 'the market' in various ways (Priemus, 1995; Haffner *et al.*, 2014). Increasingly, the aim became to reduce government involvement in the rental market and to allocate the risks of housing investment to private and non-profit actors. Furthermore, financial support became more targeted on those in need in line with the values linked to the participation society.

The most recent move towards the market was initiated by the conservative-liberal Dutch government's austerity measures following the three recessions of 2009, 2012 and 2013. First, the tasks for social rental housing providers were restricted to housing increasingly lower income households (Haffner *et al.*, 2014; Haffner *et al.*, 2018). Secondly, this involved reducing rent control for the middle-to-higher rent housing in order to allow for more attractive investment opportunities for non-social investors. Thirdly, this implied explicit promotion of the private rental sector by the minister responsible for housing. Last, but not least, government started promoting the participation society, shifting responsibilities for welfare away from government towards citizens, and reserving safety net welfare for those that cannot take part in the new society (Rutte, 2014; Blommesteijn, 2015).

These developments embodied a move away from a universal right to housing (Bengtsson, 2001), which can be considered to have been effective in the last century, when large segments of the population had access to affordable housing and there was broad societal support for this policy. This broad support had resulted in the co-construction of the definition and implementation of acceptable housing standards in terms of quality and affordability, largely by means of producing the largest social rental sector in the European Union, implementing rent control in both the social and the private rental sector in combination with a system

of housing allowances for renting. Even though such a type of universal right may literally not have been quite a legally enforceable right to housing², in practice it had largely been realized as such.

In order to analyse the impact in practice of these moves towards the market on the capabilities of households – e.g., the real freedoms to choose the life they want to live (based on Sen, 1999) – a Dutch case study conducted within the framework of Horizon 2020 RE-InVEST (note 1) studied a group of vulnerable households and their choice options for accessing affordable housing. The study aimed to determine the impact of these developments on their capabilities (Sen, 1999), e.g., their real freedoms to choose their (future) housing.

As the capability approach is a relatively new approach in the field of housing (Coates *et al.*, 2015) and homelessness (Evangelista, 2010; McNaughton Nicolls, 2010; Batterham, 2018), this contribution aims to provide insights into the added value of the capability approach in housing policy making and evaluation. RE-InVEST-researchers, Bonvin and Laruffa (2017a, 2017b, p.5)³ extended the capability approach by framing it in three anthropological roles that each individual can fulfil: doer, receiver and judge. Each role expresses ‘a valuable way of being human’ and allows the individual to exercise the freedoms to choose in different ways: acting, receiving and voicing. An impairment in a role will represent a deprivation to the individual in question, if there is a lack in opportunity to do, to receive and/or to judge, respectively.

By analysing the impact of the changes in the field of housing measured by the three anthropological roles, the vulnerable participants in the Dutch case study – Rotterdam citizens who had difficulty making financial ends meet – were able to unravel the three types of deprivation associated with the three roles in relation to their capabilities. They were able to indicate in which roles they had become more vulnerable and in which roles they identified more opportunities to be able to reduce their situation of housing deprivation. The extent to which they considered that developments had made them more vulnerable in their real freedoms to choose affordable housing was considered a weakening of their capability set.

The remainder of this contribution reports the results of this case study. The next three sections explain the approach. The three sections thereafter highlight the outcomes of the discussions with the participants about the three anthropological roles, which are a new way to unravel different types of deprivation in the capability set of (vulnerable) participants: the receiver, the judge and the doer.

² The right to housing in the Dutch Constitution (*Grondwet*) in Article 22.2 is formulated as follows: ‘*Bevordering van voldoende woonegelegenheid is voorwerp van zorg der overheid*’ (translation: encouraging an adequate housing supply belongs to the responsibilities of the government).

³ See also Bonvin & Laruffa (2018).

Capabilities

The capability approach has been positioned by Sen since the 1980s as an alternative to mainstream welfare economics (Robeyns, 2005; Van Staveren, 2008; Van Staveren, 2010; Bonvin and Laruffa, 2017b; Wells, n.d.). As a normative framework, it leaves aside the subjective measure of the utilities-based preferences, as well as the objective measure of the commodities-based resources. It focuses on choice sets that people value in relation to what they are able to be and do. It focuses on the wellbeing of individuals and the impact of social policies on the wellbeing rather than economic efficiency and economic growth.

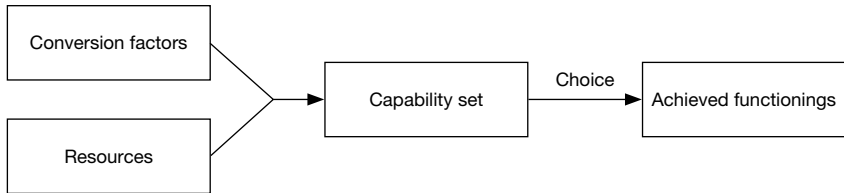
More specifically, a set of capabilities refers to the opportunities or freedoms of persons to opt for specific forms of functioning – beings or doings – based on a person's resources (Sen, 1999; Vizard and Burchard, 2007; Nussbaum, 2011). Or more broadly, they are defined as *'the real freedom to lead the kind of life people have reason to value'* (cited from Bonvin and Laruffa, 2017b, p.6, based on Sen, 1999).

For the realization of the real freedoms or 'opportunities', capabilities need the input of resources and factors that convert resources into functions (Figure 1). Resources refer to the material aid a person can mobilize (income, goods and services). Personal conversion factors, such as skills, and environmental conversion factors, such as climate and geography, are needed to transform resources into beings and doings, called functionings, which determine a person's wellbeing (Sen, 1999; see also Robeyns, 2005).

Furthermore, social factors, such as norms and values and government policies assist persons to convert their resources into wellbeing by enhancing the capabilities. A welfare state in this (RE-InVEST) perspective offers various social conversion factors to its citizens. For example, formal human rights, like a right to housing, do not necessarily enhance wellbeing, unless they are legally enforceable or rely on other types of government support that enhance people's capabilities (Nicaise *et al.*, 2017). If they are effectively considered as realized, human rights can be considered as a part of a person's resources impacting positively on his or her capabilities.

Capabilities will be compromised as a result of less effective 'support' to a person in question based on a decrease in resources and/or a limitation of conversion factors. As RE-InVEST case studies showed, austerity measures or a limitation or abolition of protective regulation are examples of measures that can take away choice opportunities that were previously enjoyed. This would entail a weakening of capabilities in the process, as these limitations consequently allow the individual less freedom to choose the life that one values. Such developments may be detrimental to the 'good' life of the person in question with increasing uncertainty about choice options to be realized and reducing personal wellbeing as a result.

Figure 1. From resources and conversion factors to achieved functionings (individual wellbeing)



Source: RE-InVEST framework based on Sen's work (see Workpackage 3 reports on the website, note 1)

Capabilities Conceptualized as Anthropological Roles

The roles that one person can fulfil according to the anthropological conception of the capability approach, which RE-InVEST researchers Bonvin and Laruffa (2017a; 2017b) proposed, go beyond mainstream welfare economics, which position a person as **receiver** of welfare. In this role the individual makes use of *'material goods'* and help (Bonvin and Laruffa, 2017b, p.8).

The anthropological conception – *'a valuable way of being human'* – allows for unravelling the role of the receiver from that of the doer and the judge.⁴ The **doer** can be regarded as the role in which a human being can act to strengthen his or her capability set (Bonvin and Laruffa, 2017b, p.8). It would show the options that an individual has to strive actively for achieving the values that he or she regards as important. With this definition Bonvin and Laruffa (2017a) follow the agency definition of Sen (1985). It includes any action by an individual (individual agency), and not only necessarily those actions that heighten wellbeing through the capabilities.

In the role of **judge/evaluator** an individual expresses his/her *'capability for voice'* (Bonvin and Laruffa, 2017b, pp.8-9). This role embodies the ability to formulate evaluations/opinions/thoughts/aspirations in combination with the ability to build support/acceptance/consensus.

⁴ Paraphrasing, Bonvin and Laruffa (2017b, pp.7-8) introduce the terms doer and judge based on Sen (1985, p.208) and Crocker (1992, p.600). They also base themselves on Nussbaum (2003), when *'human beings [are described as] vulnerable and interdependent beings'* in relation to giving and receiving care and participating politically: individuals *'as givers and members of community'*. Finally, Giovanola (2005) is referenced when Bonvin and Laruffa (2017b) state that human beings *'can flourish in a plurality of ways and especially through the relationship with other human beings.'* In a later publication, Bonvin and Laruffa (2018, p.504) construct the argument based on two concepts: *'empowerment and reasonable freedom to choose'*.

According to this anthropological conception of deprivation in the capability approach, each individual has three different roles to apply in order to enhance the freedoms to choose the life that one values. Each role sheds light on a different type of deprivation (Bonvin and Laruffa, 2017a, p.6; see also 2017b). While being deprived implies a lack of opportunity to act for the doer, also called a '*lack of opportunity for action/agency*', the disadvantage for the receiver implies a lack of sufficient material resources. The judge will be confronted with a '*lack of capacity to aspire and [or] lack of recognition*', if an evaluation cannot be formulated and/or support be built. The different types of deprivation require different solutions. Applying the capability approach allows us to unravel the different impacts on the freedom to choose for a way of life: resources, action or voice. The way of life will be impacted by individual as well as societal or collective actions.

Qualitative Methodology

The RE-InVEST case studies in 12 countries were guided by the experiential knowledge of the vulnerable households that participated in the project. In the Netherlands, the vulnerable participants consisted of residents of Rotterdam who were having difficulties making financial ends meet at the end of 2015 (Haffner et al., 2018). These participants were recruited with the help of a social landlord and a poverty network, respectively.

The collection of data from the vulnerable participants for the case study, which is of interest here, took place in March and April of 2017. Three females (age group 46-60; one from migrant background; tenants) and four males (about 60 years of age; one owner-occupier, one unknown tenure) provided their experiences in two group meetings. In the first meeting the vulnerable participants discussed the organization and outcomes of (local) (affordable) housing policies from the point of view of the three roles.

In the second meeting, the group analysed the situation of the housing market from the point of view of the occupier of the dwelling (which is main focus here), of the social rental housing provider and of the local government, respectively; particularly, what each group of actors would be able to contribute to making housing (more) affordable. Three representatives from local political parties and local government, as well as three representatives of Rotterdam social rental housing providers joined the vulnerable participants for this second discussion.

Receiver

As the vulnerable participants who had difficulties making ends meet mostly lived in a social rental dwelling with a right to housing allowances, at the time of the group discussions, they evaluated their situation as a recipient of affordable housing services still as doable. Their rents are regulated by the national government, while rental contracts are indefinite.

However, the participants – as receiver of assistance – worried about the future and the impact of the total of all austerity measures following the three recessions. These had led to higher costs for households, such as having to pay the tax for protection against the water (instead of being exempted because of a low income), paying a higher contribution to health care costs, and losing some financial support (like long-term unemployed allowance and/or chronic illness allowance). Life had become more difficult for the vulnerable participants in the past years, as Eric⁵ indicated: *'I'm being squeezed and therefore worry about the future'*. Furthermore the vulnerable participants also indicated that the housing allowance bureaucracy required a higher level of e-skills. Taken together, the vulnerable participants agreed on a clear erosion of the capability set from a receiver point of view.

Judge

The role of the judge that allows for strengthening one's capabilities involves firstly the voicing of opinions. The vulnerable participants noted that in their home city achieving an adequate housing standard was increasingly no longer as self-evident as it used to be in the past: *'Housing has become a luxury, hasn't it, particularly to live in the city,... nowadays it has become very trendy and to live or remain in your own working-class neighborhood is becoming therefore more expensive... it is the elite'* (Kathy).

The participants (second meeting) observed a decrease in affordability as a result of the relative high rent increases that national government implemented annually, and, which, as the participants elaborated on, put households they know into financial problems. At the same time, the vulnerable participants had observed a targeting in housing policies to lower income households as a result of the introduction of income caps for the allocation of social rental housing and the access to housing allowances.

The vulnerable participants also observed that people have come to realize that they can earn money by investing in housing in the city, like housing provided via Airbnb or rented out by the room. Subsidization of trendy shops (instead of affordable

⁵ Vulnerable participants are indicated with fictitious names.

housing) and prescribing certain lifestyles, like artists or people working in schools, for the allocation of housing, reinforce this trend. The aim of the municipality was regarded as upgrading neighbourhoods, even to the extent of creating house price bubbles, a phenomenon which a vulnerable participant called *'turbo capitalism'*.

Given these developments, in combination with the increase of the Dutch population from 10 million in the 1960s to 17 million in recent years contributing to the pressure on the housing market in cities, the vulnerable participants evaluated negatively the plans of the municipality to demolish 20 000 social rental dwellings and replace them with better quality and more expensive dwellings. In their eyes, this plan constituted a new round of demolition of affordable housing with the aim to mix income groups in neighbourhoods. As commercial interests seem to dominate the social interests, about 30% of tenants in Rotterdam were doomed to increasing affordability problems, while on average 'only' about 18% of Dutch tenants would be affected.

In conclusion, as judge, the vulnerable participants voiced their concerns by observing that access to affordable housing had become, and is expected to become worse in Rotterdam. The more difficult access to an adequate standard of housing therefore curtails their options to choose the kind of life they value. This type of deprivation was observed to be especially crucial for those that need to access housing, not necessarily the sitting tenants who cannot be evicted because of an indefinite rent contract and who often receive housing allowances to assist with their housing costs.

The judge's second ability, the extent to which the value judgements of the vulnerable participants were taken into account in local policies is much more difficult to evaluate than the ability to voice. The vulnerable participants of the poverty network (supporting RE-InVEST) explained that they regularly organized meetings about relevant topics and that they also were in contact with the municipality and the politicians. They made regular use of their right to contribute to hearings of the City Council or to provide official input to Council Committee meetings. The network also participated in a citywide initiative in which many organizations that fight poverty joint forces.

Furthermore, the network organized the no-vote for the 2017-referendum that the city of Rotterdam organized about the 2016 housing strategy document announcing the demolition of 20 000 affordable units (see above). The vulnerable participants indicated that it was difficult to organize the votes against this proposal. First, the participants thought the wording was *'sneaky'* (Herman): to vote for or against the housing strategy document instead of for or against the demolition of the 20 000 dwellings hid the message. Furthermore, it was difficult to activate voters as the housing strategy document did not make clear, which dwellings and tenants would

be affected. The question for the vulnerable participants was whether the improved housing quality would be worth the price of higher housing costs and of relocating lower-income households outside of the city.

In preparation for the referendum, the poverty network organized different meetings, which were poorly attended. The limited interest in the referendum was possibly caused by a general feeling of not being listened to anyway, the vulnerable participants argued. Reaching an insufficient number of votes for the referendum to make it an eligible citizen statement, allowed the municipality to proceed with the demolition, even if dwellings had not yet been written off.

The unreliable local government provision of funds for the referendum campaigns – cutting the actual amounts of subsidies in comparison to promised amounts, when the total amount of the applications surpassed the budget – was another dimension of feeling manipulated for the vulnerable participants. They agreed that those in power (the establishment) are able to hamper initiatives, which does not help to build trust in authorities; it looked like *'rules and the like are in place in order to lie to the citizen'* (Herman). To the taste of the vulnerable participants, local politics took too little action to rebuild the social support system to provide for those who could not take care of themselves. To circumvent those in power that often are attributed *'too much power'* (Angela), vulnerable participants should act themselves and should collectively act in order to effectuate a strengthening of their capability set.

Doer

As doer, a person acting to enhance his or her capability set needs to determine the options which are open to the individual to strive for aims and values that he or she regards as important for his or her housing situation. The vulnerable participants had used several temporary options in the past: being one month in arrears with the rent, borrowing on the credit card and/or reaching agreement on payment schedules when repaying benefits.

Moving to a rental home that needs work, a so-called do-it-yourself (DIY) rental dwelling (*klushuurwoning*), was suggested as a structural way of reducing housing costs. Such a social dwelling may also deliver access to a dwelling in a neighbourhood that otherwise would have been 'too' expensive. One vulnerable participant had chosen this option and elaborated that it requires DIY skills, as well as negotiation skills about trading in renovation options in exchange for lower rents. Last, but not least, it requires knowledge to decide when an expert needs to be hired.

Diverse examples of the *'right to challenge'* were put forward: Challenge the landlord, the government or the energy company to do tasks more cost-effectively; trade-off of service tasks (cleaning the hallway) or repairs and rent/service costs. In the latter case one can organize this together with neighbours, helping each other or exchange help or goods via barter. Bring together people who can and people who do (short: *'Can? Do!'*). Training tenants as energy coaches with the aim to spread knowledge about cost savings and strengthen social networks to effectuate emancipation was reported not to be so successful in Rotterdam.

Furthermore, the participants offered the following 'more' affordable housing options: share the dwelling (with brothers and sisters); shop collectively for solar panels; make dwellings energy neutral or make dwellings generate energy by what was called a *'sustainable dancefloor'*, for instance, which invites people to be mobile as well, and thereby create a win-win situation for energy and health; and have vloggers promote collective intelligence in the neighbourhood and help each other with (housing) information.

The participants weighed a number of action options as realistic, if a person is active. Sharing was argued to become more important in the next economy with a focus on trading instead of owning. Participants, however, put the question on the table whether people indeed want to share so much, while an option as trading dwellings horizontally (i.e., exchange larger for smaller dwelling) was said to work in Amsterdam and was being experimented with in Rotterdam.

Furthermore, sharing a dwelling runs into legal barriers preventing solutions. Recipients receiving welfare benefits will lose part of those benefits once they live together (i.e., parents and children). Also, rules prevent one from renting out a room in a social rental dwelling. A participant from local government or a political party commented:

'Via Airbnb... I find this an interesting option, as the city is getting more expensive, and housing for households with the lowest income is becoming inaccessible... why don't you offer this option especially to this group for a maximum period of time... ?'

These examples show that in order to realize a broadening of the capability set as doer, an individual often needs to find 'partners', as the participants noted. These partners could either be the like-minded individuals, the (social) landlord, social organizations, or facilitating and/or supporting local governments (rules, regulations, financial support, social work, etc.). Furthermore, participants provided many examples of vulnerable citizens not being able to fulfil the role of the doer. In such cases, deprivation of their capability set from the doer point of view was their fate.

Conclusions

In contrast to the traditional welfare economics and welfare state, which emphasize the role of the citizen as a receiver – a human being lacking resources –, the '*anthropological understanding*' (Bonvin and Laruffa, 2017, p.5; Wells, n.d.) of the capability approach allows for unravelling the dimensions of wellbeing and the lack thereof (deprivation). An anthropological dimension interpreted as '*a valuable way of being human*' (p.5), or simply indicated as the way an individual is, not only expresses itself in the role as receiver, but also as judge and doer. The doer that is deprived will lack certain opportunities for action, while the judge will lack opportunities to form an opinion and aspire and/or to voice this opinion and made it heard. An individual may use any of these roles to tackle a weakness in his/her capabilities, even though the roles cannot compensate each other (fully) as they each address a certain aspect of deprivation.

This new extension of the capability approach as an alternative way of welfare thinking has been explored in practice in a participatory project for housing in a western society. The vulnerable participants in the Rotterdam RE-INVEST case study, who had difficulty making financial ends meet, discussed how they were realizing these roles in relation to affordable housing, how they fared in the recent past and how they could step up these roles in the future in order to enhance their capability set.

- As the vulnerable participants mostly lived in a social rental dwelling with a right to housing allowances, as sitting tenant/**receiver** they observed their situation still as doable. Rents are regulated by government, while they cannot be evicted because of indefinite rental contracts. However, they worried about the future, as paying for housing had become more expensive, while incomes had stagnated, because of austerity measures following the economic recessions of 2009, 2012 and 2013. As for those vulnerable households not living in a social rental dwelling, access to a social rental dwelling in (popular neighbourhoods in) the city had become more difficult than in the past; therefore, a clear erosion of the capability set was identified for so-called outsider recipients of affordable housing as compared to the insider recipients. In other words, the current housing policy changes provide relative protection to the insiders of the social housing system, but for those not in the system, social protection has decreased considerably.
- As the receiver evaluation shows in the previous bullet point, the vulnerable participants as **evaluator** were clearly able to form an opinion about their real freedoms of choice for the life they valued; specifically, the life in affordable rental housing. They observed that government prioritized commercial concerns above social concerns, while assistance was being more targeted. Marketization – a move towards the market, which aimed to make Rotterdam more competitive

and efficient, entailed a move towards more market-conforming rents, the sale of affordable housing, while affordable housing was being replaced by less affordable and better-quality housing.

These developments were regarded as impacting on the housing choices of the lower- and middle-income households in Rotterdam. In the participants' opinion, housing policies had shifted towards a weakening of the traditional universal implementation of the right to adequate and affordable housing, thereby impeding their freedom of choice to live in the city. In the era of austerity, their voice was ignored by those in power; depriving the judge of its ability to voice and hampering the realization of this dimension of a participative society.

- As **doer** (the vulnerable) participants generated many ideas on how to compensate for some loss in real freedoms to choose for the life they value: how to access affordable housing and how to lower housing costs. However, for many of the ideas, acting together, the participants considered key for success: either voluntarily with like-minded individuals/households in formal settings like a tenant client board, or informal settings, such as in a poverty network (as in this case study), or in more dependent relations with social organizations (social landlords) or local government. Collectively strengthening the tenants' capability for voice may move a 'truer' version of a participation society one step closer.

In the context of housing studies, the results of this case study show that the capability approach in its anthropological meaning has added value as an evaluation tool for unravelling dimensions of human wellbeing, or rather the lack of wellbeing based on the real freedoms to choose the life one values. Which dimension of the capability set is considered deprived; is it the citizen as receiver, as doer or as judge?

The starting point is not the paternalistic welfare state determining how to assist the deprived receiver with material help, but the citizen, his/her perceptions about real freedoms to choose a 'housing' life. This definition requires as point of departure the knowledge about the life an individual values and (s)he would choose as the life (s)he wants to live. Moreover, it allows going beyond any deprivation of commodities towards a more complete understanding what it is an individual is lacking in his/her capability set.

Options to strengthen the individual's capability set would not only include state support to the individual as receiver, but also strengthen the individual's action options as doer, as well as the realization options of the capability for voice as judge. As a result, some of the solutions to housing problems will be more in the hand of the individual(s) than may be expected. With this conclusion of a bigger role for a more active citizen beyond the receiver role, this extension of the capability

approach shows overlap with the more ‘*active social citizenship*’ conceptualisation of ‘*self-responsibility*’ of the social citizenship in welfare states (Eggers *et al.*, 2019, p.44). Further explorations will need to specify the role of the government and whether it might need to be differentiated according to whether vulnerable households are able to become active.

Rather than aligning self-responsibility with austerity measures, the concept of active citizen (beyond recipient role) starts from a positive point of view: individuals can tackle different types of deprivation in different ways, and thereby strengthen their capabilities. And following Sen (1999, p.11), strengthening those for housing will provide opportunities in other areas of social policies: ‘*Freedoms of different kinds can strengthen one another*’. In this line of reasoning, the challenge will be to make housing, given its positive external effects, function as capability itself, strengthening the freedoms to choose in other areas of social policy.

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