

What do we mean by ‘capabilities’¹?

Towards a definition

In order to achieve their potential people need to be able to stay healthy and take part in cultural, economic, social and political life. Broadly speaking they need to be in a position to take responsibility for their lives. They need to be able to think, make decisions and act according to what they believe is right. All these abilities, capacities and attributes we refer to as human ‘capabilities’.

People (individually and in different groups they belong to) vary in their capability to achieve their human potential. This is because of various context-specific factors. For example, access to clean water and food can be a determining factor of a person’s present and future potential and well-being. Access to primary education can determine literacy rates, which in turn can have a dramatic impact on health, ability to learn new agricultural practices and so forth.

The hypothesis underlying this project is that access to specialised knowledge in school can also

¹ [1] The capabilities approach to human development and welfare economics was developed by Amartya Sen. It has been further developed by Martha Nussbaum and subsequently by many others.

influence human capabilities. Knowledge derived from disciplined communities enables young people 'to think the not yet thought'.

The questions that drive our research are:

1) is it possible to express how geography education may contribute to the development of human capabilities?

2) What are the consequences for young people, in terms of their future potential and well-being, of not having access to geography education?