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Fabian Scholtes

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Editors: H.-D. Evers, Solvay Gerke, Peter Mollinga, Conrad Schetter

### Authors' address

Dr. Fabian Scholtes  
Center for Development Research (ZEF), University of Bonn,  
Walter-Flex-Str. 3  
53113 Bonn, Germany  
Tel. 0049 (0)228-734967: Fax 0228-731972  
E-mail: [fabian.scholtes@uni-bonn.de](mailto:fabian.scholtes@uni-bonn.de)  
[www.zef.de](http://www.zef.de)

# Analysing and explaining power in a capability perspective<sup>1</sup>

Fabian Scholtes

## Abstract

This paper offers a conceptual framework for analysing and explaining power based on the so-called Capability Approach to development (CA). This framework is intended as a heuristic device for micro-sociological analysis of political interaction in development practice. A systematic connection of power and CA is provided, understanding power as capability to act upon one's environment. Being directed to the question of why people have the powers they have, the paper also explores CA's potential to explain how social realities come about.

The paper first reviews main features of CA. Based on this a concept of power is suggested. Power is understood to be multidimensional and contextual, resulting from the multiple-specific conversion of different sources of power. The framework specifically looks at interaction, in which dimension-specific interpersonal power differentials are constituted, deployed, and changed. The concept of structuration is then discussed to include how inter-action shapes the conditions under which it takes place. Finally, limitations and open questions are addressed.

Keywords: capability approach, power, explanation, sources of power, conversion factors, structuration

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<sup>1</sup> The author appreciates several helpful remarks by H.D. Evers.

# 1. Introduction: aims and outline of the paper

This paper has two main objectives, both of which are conceptual rather than empirical. The first objective stems from a theoretical interest in the so-called Capability Approach (CA) to development, which analyses and evaluates development in terms of human freedoms. This objective has two aspects. Firstly, I want to explore to what extent CA serves not only to describe and evaluate social reality (e.g. poverty), but also to explain how and why this reality has come about. Secondly, CA has no explicit and systematic theory of social power. This is an important lacuna. Power is a pervasive element of social relations, and both freedom (which is most central to CA) and power relate to what people are able to do. I assume that by conceptually engaging with theories of power, CA would gain from and add to these theories. Therefore, the paper systematically connects CA and power.

The second main objective of this work is problem-based and links the aforementioned issues of explaining reality and conceptualising power. The purpose of the CA-based conceptualisation of power is to serve as a heuristics for a micro-sociological analysis and explanation of interaction in development practice. I assume that, in order to explain why an observed interaction occurred as it did, we need to understand why the people involved had the respective powers that they made use of. The powers that people had and used in an interaction are at least necessary (though not sufficient!) to explain the course and outcome of that interaction. Hence, the objective of explaining social realities is pursued by explaining the powers that people have and use, thereby making these realities come about.

The only publication I am aware of that takes a similar direction is Pellissary/Bergh (2007). Their paper focuses on power inequalities in participatory processes to explain how these processes occur. As for theories of power, these authors mainly relate to a concept by Gaventa (2006) that lends itself particularly well to analysing this particular empirical object. They also relate to CA, but do so mainly by taking up the more general issue of participation. The present paper may be read as a complement of theirs, one that is more systematic (especially in drawing upon CA), more conceptual (rather than empirical), and broader. While the framework provided here is intended to serve for an empirical analysis of development interaction, it is not restricted to participatory processes and not even to development. It offers a general perspective on social interaction and contributes to the analytical operationalisation of social power by benefitting from the systematic conceptual framework of CA.

The paper's perspective will be as follows: power, understood as the capability to act upon one's environment (and especially upon others), is multidimensional, i.e. it consists in distinct powers related to different dimensions of interaction. These powers result from a person's multiple-specific conversion of sources of power. Individual powers and the related interpersonal power differentials that shape interaction may be traced back to, and therewith explained by, the context-specific conversion of available power sources into power.

In section 2, I review some relevant features of CA. Section 3 develops a CA-based definition of power. This involves the translation of CA's 'capability scheme' into a 'power scheme', i.e. a representation of how the different components of the concept of power are related. Section 4 extends this concept towards interaction and enriches it with CA features from the previous section so that it serves for describing and analysing powers in observed interaction. Insights from other theories of power help to sophisticate the concept to an extent that seems needed and useful. In order to also explain why people have these powers, the sources of power will be addressed and added to the scheme in the next section (section 5). This leads to the question how the sources of power not only influence, but also are influenced by interaction (section 6). The conclusion gives an outlook on how the connection of power and CA towards an analytical and explanatory concept may be developed further.

Note that the suggested scheme does not represent reality. Human interaction is too complex to 'fit' entirely into a scheme. The scheme represents a framework for bringing analytical notions – terms we use when we describe, analyse, or even explain reality – into coherence. The scheme does not (ontologically) postulate that knowledge were a resource of power, a structural condition of power, or a factor of converting something into power. It helps to (analytically) see the difference it makes if we consider knowledge a resource, a condition, or a factor, and to see how these categories are linked.

## 2. Some main features of the Capability Approach

The Capability Approach (CA) as put forward by Amartya Sen and others<sup>2</sup> looks at development in two main perspectives. Firstly, it is a normative-evaluative approach that argues for evaluating states of affairs by assessing them with reference to real freedoms, in the sense of how able people effectively are to do and be what they “have reason to value” (Sen 1999: 10. Secondly, to assess reality in terms of people’s real freedoms, one needs to describe and analyse this reality. Hereto, the concept of capability serves as a – fractional – representation of the freedom of a person: the capability of a person consists in her positive opportunity freedom to effectively lead one life or another. According to CA, this freedom adds to the negative process freedom to decide and act without interference from others.

In this paper, I will draw on the following features of CA. First, a person’s capability is multidimensional. It consists in a set of several freedoms (capabilities) that the person has regarding particular ‘beings and doings’, i.e. dimensions of life. In CA, these dimensions are termed ‘functionings’. An example would be the functioning of ‘being well-nourished’. Thus, the different capabilities of a person represent her dimension-specific freedoms to effectively realise the related functionings.<sup>3</sup> These different dimensions, which can be specified in more or less detail, have to be taken into account distinctly.

Second, freedom or capability comprises options that are at a person’s disposition. It encompasses what people are able to do, rather than only what they in fact do. People may have more capabilities, and each capability to a greater extent, than they actually deploy.

Third, the freedoms of people are not only dimension-specific, but each freedom or capability is multiple-specific with regards to its origin: it results from many interdependent factors or surrounding conditions that are context-specific as well as person-specific. CA considers these specific conditions by the concept of conversion factors (Sen, 1999, p. 70f.; Robeyns, 2005, p. 98ff.). For illustrative purposes, these factors may be pictured in a conversion chain: A person commands over (1a) resources or endowments, including workforce that may be (1b) exchanged on the labour market in order to obtain (1c) alternative bundles of goods. These goods can (2) be converted into (3) capabilities. This conversion, again, is influenced by several factors. Among these are (2a) individual factors (for example personal characteristics that influence how much of a good one needs to achieve a certain capability), (2b) social factors (institutions that regulate what a person is allowed to do with goods, or the action of others in one’s environment), and others (2c-n).

Note that this list is not comprehensive, and that it contains redundancies: social institutions that work as a factor of the conversion of goods into capabilities (4b) also influence beforehand the actual exchange of labour into these goods (2). As was pointed to in the introduction, this stems from an institution not being (ontologically speaking) a conversion factor or something else, but being considered (analytically) as such factor.

A person’s capabilities thus depend on a complex context of available conversion inputs and conversion factors, and on the conversion itself as done by the person. In CA, this multiple dependence or specificity is important for the following reason. The end of development is what people are effectively able to do or be, and not what they have in terms of means, since it is not clear what they are able to do and be with these means.<sup>4</sup> Therefore it has to be taken into account how specific people in specific circumstances differ in deriving freedom from a set of available means. For example, the freedom to be well-nourished from a bowl of rice differs between a pregnant woman and a young boy.

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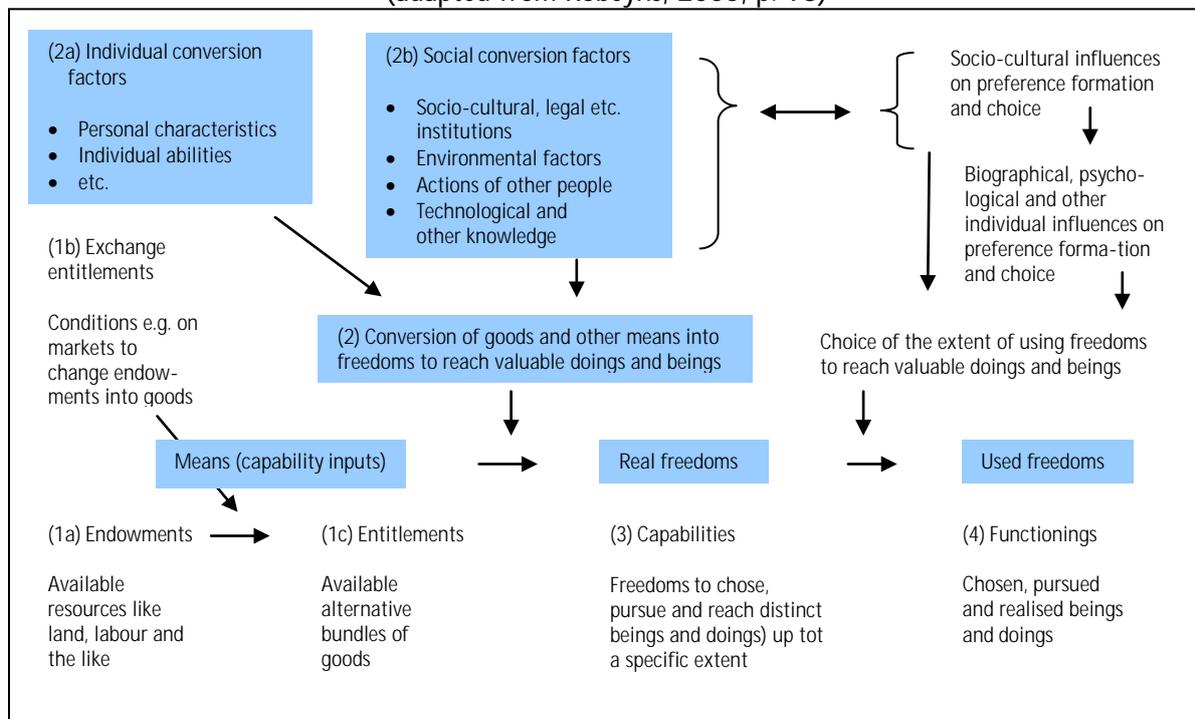
<sup>2</sup> The version of CA adopted here is the one by Sen, rather than that of others like Martha Nussbaum. However, the features discussed here are fairly similar in all versions, so that results should be transferable.

<sup>3</sup> “Capability represents the various combinations of functioning (beings and doings) that the person can achieve.” (Sen, 1992, p. 40)

<sup>4</sup> For completeness, one should mention: ... nor what people in fact do and be (as this would neglect the options, and the value of these options, that people have beyond what they decide to do), nor the utility that people happen to have from making use of their opportunities (as this would neglect the extend to which people adapt to their real situation, e.g. deriving relatively high utility from rather scanty goods).

Thus, the capabilities that people have can be traced back individually to the available means and the particular circumstances of the individual conversion of these means into freedoms. This tracing can be done along the conversion chain described above and represented in the following 'capability scheme'. The arrows indicate major directions of influence.

Figure 1 Conversion of capability inputs into capabilities  
(adapted from Robeyns, 2005, p. 98)



Based on the idea of conversion factors, the concept of capability also allows for representing, to some extent, the origin of the freedoms that people have, by showing how circumstances influence the capabilities that a person derives from her endowments. Hence, the concept does provide some basis for understanding why people have these freedoms, and not others. Still, as Robeyns holds, while CA is an approach to conceptualise and evaluate social phenomena like poverty, it "is not a theory that can explain poverty" (2005, p. 94).

However, note the following, important difference that concerns the explanatory objective of the paper: with the concept of conversion as described above, CA does offer a basis for explaining poverty in the sense of how poverty in terms of a lack of capabilities results from given circumstances as they are picture in the scheme (capability inputs, conversion factors etc.). What CA may not (yet) be able to explain is how poverty, now understood as the given circumstances that result in a lack of capabilities, actually comes about. It is especially with regards to the latter that CA's potential as an explanatory theory has not developed yet, and with regards to which this paper suggests an extension of the approach.

### 3. Power as the capability to act upon one's environment

Power relates to an ability to act; moreover, „power is always relational and relative. An actor by himself is not powerful or weak, he may be powerful in relation to some actors in regard to some matters and weak in relation to other actors on other matters“ (Etzioni, 1968/1993, p. 18). According to this view, power is not a mere ability, but something one has in relation to others: one is for instance able to make others do what they otherwise would not do (as Max Weber's definition implies<sup>5</sup>). Power is relative in that the same ability may constitute power over a less able person, but not over a person more able than oneself.

At first sight, there seems to be little difference between power and capability. Both refer to an ability to act, and in both imply a context-dependence of this ability. However, 'having power' is different from 'being free', which is the very meaning of 'being capable' in CA. Firstly, capability is an absolute concept in that it represents or measures what people are able to do or be by themselves, and not – or at least not immediately – relative to what others are able to do or be. For sure, when assessing a social setting, once one has measured the capabilities of different persons absolutely, one may compare across persons, thus considering the capabilities relatively. Likewise, the concept of capability does contain a relational aspect as it conceptualises what people are in fact able to do or be depending on what other people in fact do or are. However, the question of which capabilities people have is posed as the question to which extent a person is absolutely able to realise a functioning. Opposed to this, the question of which power a person has cannot meaningfully be asked in an absolute way, i.e. not in relation to others. While both capability and power result from social relations and other factors, it is only power that is constituted by a relation (between persons) and by a differential (one being more able than the other). While one might say that power resides in a relation, capability is something a person has (or not).

Secondly, capability relates to what people can or cannot do with and in their own lives. Thus, while the concept is socially sensitive in the sense that it is aware of how capabilities depend on external factors, including other people, it is not socially directed. Power, on the other hand, may be understood as an ability that is not only constituted by how able others are, but that is even directed towards others. Put differently, power may be understood as outward-oriented. This may be a more contestable distinction between power and capability. One may for instance understand 'empowerment' as being about making people more able in relation to their own goals (and not in relation to other persons). However, this would conflate the notions of power and capability. In order to use power as an analytical notion different from capability, let me suggest the following definition of power:

Power is an interpersonal, relative, outward-oriented capability to act upon one's (social) environment. Thus, power is a specific kind of capability that is constituted by an interpersonal constellation, which is thereby relative, and which is about how one can be effective on others.

This may seem to be a 'conflictual' (Haugaard 2002) concept that understands power not so much positively as the ability of people to act in concert with others, for instance in political movements, but rather negatively as the ability to act upon each other, i.e. to impose one's own will on others. But the definition does not preclude the cooperative side of power. Rather, CA does offer conceptual space for it with its distinction of well-being goals and agency goals: In contrast to well-being, to which capability is often related (Sen, 2004, p. 331), agency means "what a person can do in line with his or her conception of the good. The ability to do more good need not be to the person's advantage." (Sen, 1985, p. 206) Examples for agency often refer to political commitment (e.g. Robeyns, 2005, p. 102). Agency in this sense very much corresponds with positive 'power with others'.

This link deserves further analysis: in development practice, strategic coalitions that aim accumulation and stabilisation of cooperative power have often been observed and analysed as 'strategic groups' (see

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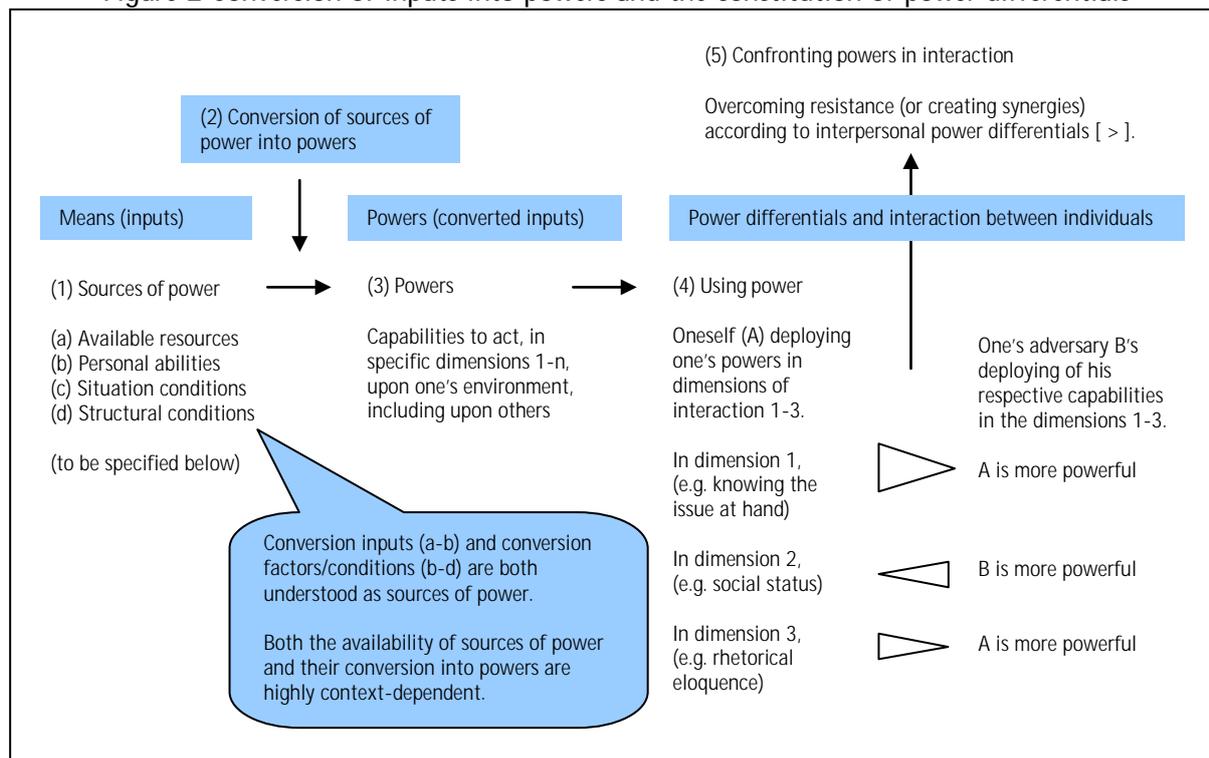
<sup>5</sup> Power is "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests" (Weber, 1947, p. 37).

Evers 1973, Bierschenk/Olivier de Sardan 1997). However, the focus here is on the conflictual side of power in interaction, i.e. power as a capability to act upon others. This seems heuristically very relevant for analysing politics in development practice, since development arenas have typically been described as places where disorder prevails (Mosse, 2005), where interests compete and collide, where policies, meanings etc. are contested and manipulated, and where power inequalities distort procedures that aim at participation and inclusion (recently: Eyben et al. (ed.) 2006, Pellissery/Bergh 2007).<sup>6</sup>

#### 4. Powers in interaction: a conceptual scheme based on the Capability Approach

Defining power as a capability to act upon one's environment is a first step, but not sufficient to serve as analytical tool. This section translates the definition into a more detailed power scheme that pictures interaction between persons as a situation in which powers are exerted. This scheme is based on the capability scheme of the previous section, and the three features of CA included in it: the multi-dimensionality of power/capability, the aspect of power/capability being dispositional, and its multiple context-/conversion-specificity.

Figure 2 Conversion of inputs into powers and the constitution of power differentials



This scheme reads as follows. A person A has to have access to (1) sources of power that one may (2) use and thus convert into (3) powers (distinct capabilities to act upon one's environment). These powers one can then (4) use to pursue one's goals in (5) interaction with person B and others, in which one tries to overcome resistance or in which different powers add in a cooperative, synergetic manner.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> For further analyses of politics in development, see for instance Evers (1999), Mosse/Lewis (2005), Grillo/Stirrat (1997), Ferguson (1994), Crewe/Harris (1998), Mosse (2004), Rottenburg (2000).

<sup>7</sup> This scheme is comparable to the "exercise of social power" scheme by Olsen/Marger (1993a, pp. 5f.): To exert power, one has to (1) have command over resources that (2) one may commit to pursuing a certain goal even against others' wills, and which one has (3) to convert into actual power in order to (4) overcome resistance.

## Power: interactive and multidimensional

What does this scheme offer to an analysis of power? First of all, it extends the capability scheme by including interaction. As assumed by the end of section 2, those realities that may result in a lack of capabilities (i.e. poverty) are, to a considerable extent, caused by the powers that people exert in social interaction. Therefore, taking into account the interfaces<sup>8</sup> of interacting persons seems crucial for understanding how their capabilities and, therewith, their powers come about. It is at these interfaces that capabilities of persons (for instance rhetorical eloquence) gain the more specific facet of being capabilities to act upon each other (for instance persuading the other), and of restricting or enhancing others' capabilities. It is here that powers as the capabilities of a person to act upon his or her environment turn into powers over (or, when interaction is cooperative, powers with) other persons.

At the interface of interaction, the different powers, when being confronted, also constitute those interpersonal power differentials that shape the outcomes of interaction. These differentials, represented in figure 2 by the small triangles between person A and B, are dimension-specific: A has not simply more or less power than B, but she has more or less power regarding distinct dimensions of interaction (for instance the rhetoric dimension). This multi-dimensionality is, according to CA, not reducible to an overall measure, which is why the pluralisation (powers) is important. There can be a great variety of powers involved in interaction, and while in terms of some of these dimensions A may be able to exert power, person B may be so in terms of others. The scheme captures that a situation is shaped not by one person being dominated completely, i.e. in every dimension of interaction, but by one person being in an inferior position in some respects and predominant in others. This complexity, which may be assumed as characteristic of most interaction, would be concealed were these dimensions and distinct powers not taken into account separately.

## Extensiveness, comprehensiveness, intensity, and latency: aspects of power(s)

What else does the scheme comprehend, and how does it relate to the literature on power? Consider the following aspects that Wrong (1979, p. 15) suggests to describe interpersonal power relations. The first is extensiveness: with whom does a person have a power relation? The second is comprehensiveness: in which dimensions or "scopes" does a power relation consist? The third is intensity: how powerful is a person with regards to each dimension?

The question of with whom one has a power relation is necessarily posed by the scheme, since much of the powers each person brings into interaction is related to whom that person is. However, the scheme does not simply look at who the people involved are, but how this makes them be more powerful in this situation – or not, depending on the circumstances. Thus, the scheme specifies Wrong's question. For example, in an analysis of the interaction of a development banker and an NGO worker, merely asking 'who the other is' may suggest a power differential in favour of the banker – while in fact, due to situational restrictions (for instance the irrelevance of the banker's financial power) the NGO worker may well be more powerful in important dimensions of this interaction.

In that sense, the scheme systematically contextualises the question of 'who' the involved persons are by asking how this translates into power. This is only one way how the scheme uses CA's idea that (i) the capabilities/powers of a person depend on the conversion of capability inputs available to the person in the particular context, and that this conversion depends on (ii) context-specific conversion factors as well as (iii) the abilities of the person to convert available inputs under these circumstances. More generally, the very contribution of this scheme as an analytical framework lies in reframing the question of 'which powers does a person really have?' by asking 'which are the inputs available to the person, and which are the circumstances under which the person may convert these into powers?'

The second aspect question of comprehensiveness corresponds to CA's concept of multidimensional power. As an element of the scheme above, it urges to differentiate and specify the observed interaction:

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<sup>8</sup> The notion of interface has been used by the Wageningen University's Development Sociology Group (Long 2001). In this group it has a more specific and less situational meaning in that it reflects "the social discontinuities, based upon discrepancies in values, interests, knowledge and power" (Long 2001: 243, my emphasis).

which dimensions are relevant? How can they be distinguished as dimensions in which people deploy different powers? How can they be ordered or even categorised to gain a more systematic picture of the situation? Which are for instance 'main dimensions' of interaction, i.e. dimensions on a higher level of aggregation – so that the complexity of the analysis can be maintained at a feasible level?

Wrong's third aspect of intensity is of particular importance. It leads to the second feature of CA and to a major challenge in both capability and power analysis. The feature is the idea of capability and power being dispositional. This implies that by observing how people act upon their environment we cannot be sure how able they actually are to do so. In some situations it may be plausible to assume that a person has made use of all the powers at her disposition. Still, it is a general challenge to empirically capture unused capabilities and powers. Moreover, people not only make choices when they use options (i.e. put capabilities into practice), but already when they acquire options (i.e. convert inputs into capabilities, or sources of power into powers). People may leave source of powers unused, which makes it difficult to conclude the powers of a person from the sources of power at her disposition.

This challenge can hardly be overcome here. It rather has to be recognised as a limit to the completeness of any power analysis. However, that powers are dispositional relates to another issue, namely the differentiation with regards to potential action. Power may stem from person B's mere perception of person A to be able to act upon person B, without A actually exerting this power. This may be the case when A is actively engaged in the "manipulation of impressions" (Olsen/Marger, 1993a, p. 2), fostering the image of herself as capable to act. It may also be the case when the perception of A as powerful is only generated by B, who nevertheless adapts his behaviour towards A. For analysis, this means that the question of how intense A's power is has to be answered according to a research-specific decision about whether power that is 'only' subjectively perceived by B should count as power of A or not. The scheme does not subscribe only to one of the possible views. It rather underlines the "latency of power" (Wrong, 1979, p. 11), and the difference between latent power as the capability to act ("having power", *ibid.*) and manifest power as the actual performance of this capability ("exercising power", *ibid.*), need careful consideration.

### **Limitations: the role of choices and the scope of analytical distinctions**

There are other restrictions to the scheme. Even if one achieves a comprehensive picture of capability/power inputs that are at hand, of conversion factors that are effective, and of the conversion abilities that people have (which is what the scheme encompasses), one has not yet addressed the question of choice. This involves two things: why does a person choose to convert these available sources of power into these powers? And why does a person choose to deploy a power to the extent she does? This is a fundamental restriction of the framework (and of other concepts of power as well). It will be addressed in the conclusion.

Another limitation stems from the analytical nature of the scheme: like in the capability scheme, the distinction between inputs and conversion factors (or circumstances of conversion) is not one that is given by reality, but one imposed by the analyst. The problem of consistent distinctions that comes along with this therefore cannot be solved by the conceptual scheme, but has to be left to the concrete analysis. To support this, the next section suggests a more detailed differentiation of sources of power.

## **5. Explaining powers by tracing them back to sources of power**

This section has three objectives. One is to make the power scheme from the previous section more detailed, so that power-oriented analysis of interaction may be more systematic, and to make the framework more substantial. This is pursued by distinguishing four categories of what people derive power from and by illustrating them with examples. A second objective is to suggest more explicitly how the distinct powers of persons may be explained – herewith also explaining at least partly the realities that these powers cause. Finally, the section links the CA-based conceptualisation to other existing theories of social power.

## Resources

A useful way to categorise and order different sources of power is to start with those most at the disposition of a person, going to those that are least available. Firstly, consider resources that the observed agents command of. These may be tangible ones, like material wealth, physical strength or the like. They may also be intangible ones, for instance cognitive abilities, personal charisma, or personal affiliations to networks or social classes.

A particular case of intangible resources is knowledge, and it lends itself to differentiating the category of resources further. Connections of power and knowledge have been discussed extensively. Most of this literature relates to the power to produce, order, but also de-value knowledge of 'what things are', 'what is true', 'what is good' etc. It also relates to power derived from such knowledge, in particular to further power that results from power over such knowledge. When people derive power from this knowledge even though they do not have power over it, this systematic would not consider it a resource, but a structural condition. The paragraph on structural sources of power takes up this perspective. To the extent that people are able to influence what is known to be good, true, etc., this knowledge would be considered a resource at their disposal. However, power is based on knowledge not only in the sense of ideology, but also in the sense of available, processed and thus usable information. As an example, consider a negotiation between a development project manager and a financier. If the manager knows about the financier's need to maintain an activity in the sector or region of the project, he may use this knowledge as a resource to bargain the financier down to further, less conditional support, even despite the project's performance.

Resources may be differentiated further. For instance, they may constitute personal assets, meaning that the person owns them or has otherwise regular command of them. This kind of sources of power corresponds to 'endowments' in CA's capability scheme. An example would be land property. Resources may also be available to the person without being personally owned assets – for instance because she already has sufficient power to get and maintain access to them. An example for this would be social networks. These do not usually belong to a person, but they constitute a resource to the extent that a person may access and use them and thus convert them into power.

In some cases the analytical category of resources may be unproblematic. It seems plausible to consider money an input which a person may convert into the power to buy votes, depending on the contextual conversion factors like availability of mass media, the person's rhetoric ability to convince voters with that money etc. In other cases, the distinction is less clear. The analyst has to judge as what to consider something: should one consider information about the voters' needs an input (to be converted into power) or a factor of converting another input (like money) into power?

## Personal conversion abilities

By intuition, personal abilities like skills, knowledge and others constitute another source of power. However, in the case of abilities, the distinction between inputs and conversion factors is particularly relevant. Take the example of power in the form of authority, which has as its "base" (French/Raven 1959) the power holder's legitimacy, i.e. the perception of others that she is the right person to command, represent or the like. While authority and legitimacy often stem from formal delegation, they also may stem from a more informal ascription of power based on a person's expertise ('authority of the expert'<sup>9</sup>). In this case, one should differentiate if the person's expertise consists in knowing for instance how to solve a technical problem – in this case, expertise is an input in the sense of a resource that the person may convert into power; or if the expertise consists in knowing how to actually derive legitimacy and authority from this problem-solving knowledge – in this case, the expertise rather functions as an ability.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Evers/Gerke (2005) discuss how experts derive power from expertise in globalising development practice.

<sup>10</sup> Therefore, when referring to knowledge, the distinction of resource vs. ability is not necessarily congruent with the distinction of 'know that' (knowing what is the case) vs. 'know how', since 'know how' may both serve as an input or as a conversion ability. The know-how/-that distinction goes back to Ryle (1949).

Note that in this example, the kind of expertise more or less dictates as what to consider it in analysis. In other cases, it may be even more left to the decision of the researcher as what to consider. In any case, the suggestion would be to categorise as 'conversion abilities' those that contribute to how effectively the person can actually insert her resources into the conversion mechanisms that are available, and relevant, in the particular situation. Abilities that (are considered to) function as inputs should rather be categorised as a particular kind of resource. However, even this suggestions needs to be handled with care, since the function of an ability of a person may change throughout the course of interaction, and so should its consideration by the researcher.

## Situational conditions

While both abilities and resources are available to a person rather immediately, there are other sources of power that lie in the framing conditions of (inter-) action, and are less readily (if at all) available and at a person's disposition. Two categories need to be distinguished: situational vs. structural conditions. Among the former are those that specifically define an arena: where does interaction take place? Seen from one' agent's point of view, is it a 'home match' or an alien space with uncertainties)? Under which framing data, in particular along which agenda does interaction take place, and in which interpersonal constellation – who and how many are the others, what are their respective status, interests, strategies etc.? What are the more personal situational conditions of the agent herself and how prepared is she to enter the arena? What risks is she running that lie outside the arena, but that will be affected by the interaction's outcomes?

Note that the distinction of situational conditions vs. interaction is again a blurry one: At every point in time, the current state of interaction constitutes the situation, and therewith with the conditions from which people derive their respective powers. The resulting power differentials then, in turn, shape the next step of interaction that (re-)constitutes the situation. For instance, a delegate from the central government may loose authority in his interaction with members of the local government when revealing that he is not knowledgeable about certain local conditions of development. This reduces his authority and thus redefines the situation. On the other hand, exerting power can open up sources of additional powers. For instance, once an agent has managed to change the agenda towards a 'general discussion', she may be able to tap more easily her rhetoric abilities. Hence, situational conditions are dynamic sources of power: they change with, and are changed by, interaction.

## Structural conditions

Structural conditions of interaction that may function as sources of power are least accessible to the persons involved. Some are rather visible and formally institutionalised, like laws. For instance, an employee who is legally required to obey certain orders from his employer may at the same time be legally entitled to a certain wage. Beyond this, there are other, less formalised structures that influence for instance how the employee may convert labour effectiveness into bargaining power for higher wages. As an example, he may draw on moral common sense that prescribes different treatment due to personal circumstances.

In theories of social power, much attention is given to those conditions that underlie the conversion of one's resources into power in a rather tacit or implicit manner. While social structures and institutions such as the authority and status of family members are often explicit, though only partly legally fixed, underlying cultural meanings are often not only taken for granted (as are social rules), but also relatively unconscious. Discursive regimes that privilege certain knowledge or systems of meanings as 'true' tacitly constitute social realities in which individuals are more or less powerful than others.<sup>11</sup> These regimes ('discourses') gain prevalence through power and also grant power.

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<sup>11</sup> This perspective draws in particular on the work of Foucault (e.g. 1979). The related literature is immense. A helpful overview over Foucault's own contributions is Faubion (2000). A connection between Foucault and CA is drawn by Tobias (2005) who, referring to CA, recalls the conditions of the possibility of freedom in the sense of self-definition, as put forward in the late Foucault.

A related concept is Bourdieu's concept of habitus: "a tacit knowledge of how to 'go on' as a competent social agent. It is a form of disposition derived from life experience. In this sense, habitus is both an internalisation of reality and, in the moment of practice, an externalisation of self as constituted through past experience." (Haugaard, 2002, p. 225) Both 'discourse' and 'habitus' conceptualise the embeddedness of individual action into overall power relations that are established in social structures and cultural systems of meaning. In the literature on power, it is Lukes' (1974) third dimension of power, which consists in the influence of inherited patterns and collective knowledge (biased by the more powerful actors), that has most prominently systematised this aspect of power. More recently, Gaventa (2006, p. 29) has added the similar concept of 'invisible power', i.e. power in the form of shaping meanings that influence interaction.

## Explaining powers by tracing them back to sources of power and their conversion

Each interaction is shaped by the particular combination of the multitude of such sources of power, via the situational, individual and otherwise particular conversion of these sources into powers and the use of these powers by the persons involved. How can this spectrum of different factors be used to explain social realities like for instance poverty?

The assumption of this paper is that explaining how realities like poverty come about (or persist) involves explaining the course of interaction in development and other social practices that influence these realities. Since interaction is considerably (though not only) influenced by the powers of the persons involved, explaining how these powers come about is an important step. The heuristically assumed 'causal' chain then goes as follows: more or less available sources of power and their conversion result in powers; in interaction these powers constitute power differentials; these differentials allow people to take certain actions; the resulting course and outcomes of interaction impact on the social reality at large, for instance the success of a development project and, thus, the reduction of poverty.

Based on this, the power-oriented analysis and explanation can be operationalised by posing questions like the following, moving recursively from observed practice to sources of power and their conversion through the persons involved:

- Whose influence and which decisions have led to the practice that is assumed to have caused the observed state of poverty?
- In which political arenas and other situations of interaction have these decisions been taken and has this influence been made effective?
- Who was involved, which were the important dimensions of interaction, and how relatively powerful were the involved persons in and throughout this interaction, with respect to each of these dimensions?
- From which sources of power did they derive these powers? Which of these were personal inputs (like money, expertise etc.), which were situational sources of power (like the place and setting of interaction), which were structural sources of power (like formal and informal hierarchies, rules of interaction etc.)?
- With which abilities did they convert these sources into powers? Which were relevant structural and situational circumstances of conversion? Etc.

There are two issues to keep in mind. First, while resources – know-how, income, or status within society – as well as the ability to convert these into powers contribute mostly positively to the person's power, situational and structural conditions may function positively as sources or negatively as restrictions of power. Which of the two is the case is often not intrinsic to a condition. It depends on how a person is able to relate to and make use of a condition. A highly regulated meeting structure may restrict a development agent's power to get her topic on the agenda; it may just as well help her to do so if she is able to interpret a certain agenda item as one that invites her topic. Similarly, social rules may prohibit the strategy of exposing the weaknesses of one's adversary. However, if the situation changes, the same person for which this used to be a restriction may suddenly find herself in danger of her own weaknesses being exposed and may need to mobilise the same set of rules at her favour.

Moreover, depending on his or her abilities, the person may be able to change the relation of her strategy to these rules by giving the strategy a different meaning, or she may be able to even manipulate the

relevant set of rules by successfully re-interpreting its scope. In both cases, the strategy becomes legitimate and the set of rules turn to the person's favour. In the latter case, the structural sources of power change. This is the second issue to keep in mind. Structural conditions are those that are more stable than situational conditions because they embody established power relations, as compared to those dynamic power relations that change with interaction. However, social rules and cultural meanings are contested and subject to change as well. The next section takes up this issue.

## 6. Structuration: the shaping of the social conditions of action

Depending on the course interaction takes, and especially in conflictive encounters, people dynamically affect each other's capabilities and immediately change the power differentials between each other. A more indirect interdependence between actors stems from actions changing the very structure that, again, enables and shapes action. This has been conceptualised most prominently by Giddens' (1984) in his theory of 'structuration'. Structuration denotes the ongoing mutual constitution of individual agency and social structure. In the terminology of Clegg (1989), agents, in the 'episodic' moment of actually exerting power, make use of sources of power that are available on the 'dispositional' level of social structure.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, the episodic use of power sources also impacts on the dispositional level by changing meanings, standards of action etc.<sup>13</sup> Strange (1994, p. 25) calls this influence of actors on underlying conditions 'structural power', or the power to shape frameworks, as opposed to 'relational power' that relates to interaction in a given framework.<sup>14</sup>

The idea of structuration matters for several reasons. Firstly, it adds to CA in the sense that it offers a systematic inclusion of the feedback from capability and agency to social structure. Speaking in terms of the capability scheme (fig. 1) or the CA-based power scheme (fig. 2), arrows can be drawn from the interface of interacting people back to the inputs and conversion factors, or the sources of power that enable this interaction.

Hereby, secondly, the idea of structuration offers a basis to explore further CA's idea of agency freedom, namely as the possibility to change the very conditions in which one pursues one's goals. Relating to "spaces" (Gaventa 2006) of public participation, Pellissary/Bergh (2007, 288) quote the following: "Freedom is the capacity to participate in shaping the social limits defining what is possible." (Hayward, 1998, p. 21, as quoted in Gaventa 2006, 26) Substituting 'freedom' with 'power', this quote serves for summarising the understanding of power in this paper: social limits define (= restrictive role of social structure) what is – nevertheless, or hereby – possible to do (= enabling role of social structure). How far these limits can then be shaped by an actor (= effect of agency on structure) depends upon how powerful the actor is, depending on his conversion of the several sources of power (including the effect of structure on agency).

Thirdly, and more related to the explanatory objective of this paper, including the interdependence of power and sources of power (including structural ones) makes the analysis of power more complex than was suggested with the linear, recursive list of questions in the former section. One cannot explain why people have their powers simply by deducing these from available sources of power, since the explaining

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<sup>12</sup> Clegg (see Haugaard, 2002, pp. 245ff.) discusses these different levels as circuits of power. Episodic power that A exerts on B is a reflection of a dispositional power (a system of meanings internalised in everyday life), which entails conditions under which A can actually exert this power. Dispositional powers are mutually connected to episodic power in a process of structuration as assumed by Giddens. They are integrated into a broader system, which constitutes the level of the systemic whole.

<sup>13</sup> Note that if in this process interaction shapes the more tacitly underlying conditions of interaction, it does so rather on the structural level, and not so much on the more specific inter-actor level. The latter aspect concerns how individuals – more or less consciously and strategically – influence the mindsets of their direct adversaries. This has been referred to as 'soft power' (Nye 2004, with a focus on international relations), i.e. power stemming from making the adversary share one's own references, wishes and the like.

<sup>14</sup> Strange refers to international relations. She has in mind not only the soft side of these frameworks, i.e. the tacit, less conscious cultural conditions that are at the heart of structuration theory, but also the hard side, including decision-making procedures and the like.

variable (sources of power) varies with the variation of the variable to be explained (power). While this may be less significant in the case of deeply-rooted structural conditions of interaction, it is most importantly the case with dynamic, situational conditions of interaction. Tracing powers back to sources of power needs to be complemented by a more systematic understanding of how the use of powers in interaction impacts on the conditions of that interaction. It is here that a CA-based power analysis will learn from theories of structuration.

## 7. Conclusion: what the framework offers and what it does not offer

This paper has developed a conceptualisation of power based on the Capability Approach (CA). It is intended as a heuristic framework for the micro-sociological analysis and explanation of power in political interaction, especially in development practice. Before one can apply and also test it in empirical research, it should be discussed as it stands so far. Let me summarise its potential, value, and limitations.

The framework offers a systematic connection of power and CA, which is missing to date, defining power as a capability to act upon one's environment. By being directed not only to the analysis of which powers people have and exert in interaction, but also to the explanation of why people have these powers, the framework offers an explanatory concept that may complement CA in understanding how social phenomena like poverty come about. The very idea of this concept takes up a central feature of CA and consists in tracing power back to available inputs and relevant conversion factors, i.e. to the context-specific sources of power that people may, or do, convert into power. Power is analysed and explained in a highly contextual way. With this concept, the paper also contributes to investigating CA's potential to explain the emergence of social realities.

The paper makes use of further features of CA and takes up insights from the existing literature. The most important feature is that power is understood as multidimensional and power differentials between people are taken into account specifically regarding different dimensions of interaction. This allows for capturing in more detail the complexity of social interaction (but needs to be applied adequately in order to keep analysis feasible).

Moreover, the notion of structuration was discussed in order to include into CA-based analysis how interaction is not only influenced by, but also shapes the conditions under which it takes place. With regards to CA, this contributes to understanding how capabilities influence the social conditions of action. With regards to power analysis, tracing powers back to their sources is not sufficient to explain these powers, as also changes of these sources (especially of the more dynamic, situational ones) need to be explained.

These results show that power analysis would gain from CA's conceptualisation of what people are able to do, and that CA, on the other hand, would gain from exploring how people affect each other's capabilities in interaction and via structuration. This paper has aimed to contribute to this mutual enrichment. The following questions remain open.

(1) Due to its purpose, i.e. the analysis of micro-politics in development, the framework was focused on the interaction of individuals. This is of limited use for explaining collective action and 'consensual' power emerging from group-wide cooperation. While for the purpose of this paper collective action may figure as a source of power that individuals make use of, addressing collective phenomena requires complementary or other concepts.

(2) The explanation of social realities with this framework 'goes behind' powers as explaining variables, asking what these powers that shape interaction stem from. Looking at why people were able to act as they did helps to understand how the observed realities emerged. However, why people chose to convert these sources of power and to deploy these powers to the extent they did had to remain unanswered. This issue needs to be dealt with using complementary theories of choice. More generally, the perspective of power does not aim at explain everything. Other aspects have to be considered as well.

(3) The framework offers an external, observation-based view on interaction. This needs to be complemented by the perspectives of the agents involved. What the actual outcome and conditions of interaction are cannot be derived from the 'analyst's view' alone.<sup>15</sup>

(4) The framework has offered a variety of analytical distinctions, many of which have to be adapted to the particular research context. In addition, one must consider how far it is feasible to draw these distinctions coherently in a concrete case.

(5) With this framework, it can be asked from where power stems. How does this perspective link up with other concepts of power? To offer an outlook, some connections can be mentioned briefly. As a way of categorising powers, one may specify in which spaces (Gaventa 2006) power is exerted and how this influences interaction. Moreover, it can be asked how visibly power is being exerted. This relates to Lukes' (1974) dimensions, or Gaventa's (2006) levels of power. A third way of categorising powers is to ask in which form power is exerted – authority, force, persuasion – and on which base (French/Raven 1959) this power rests – legitimacy, physical force, charisma etc. The latter concept is similar to the term 'sources' as used in this paper and a first step of joining the two may be to look at where the different bases may figure in the four categories of sources. The forms of power may be considered as a way of categorising, for analytical purposes, the different dimensions of interaction and the powers related to them. Other concepts may likewise be connected to the framework offered in this paper.

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<sup>15</sup> Even the meaning of power itself has to be considered from the perspective of the people involved. While meaning of power that has been put forward in this framework only has the status of an analytical notion specifically defined to be used as approach to reality, it is nevertheless a particular one. Anderson (1972) description of "The idea of power in Javanese culture" illustrates how understandings of power may differ across cultures.

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