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***Poverty, aspirations and wellbeing:  
afraid to aspire and unable to reach  
a better life – voices from Egypt***

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Brooks World Poverty Institute  
ISBN : 978-1-907247-40-8

**January 2011**

**BWPI Working Paper 141**

*Creating and sharing knowledge to help end poverty*

[www.manchester.ac.uk/bwpi](http://www.manchester.ac.uk/bwpi)

## **Abstract**

Poverty is usually associated with powerlessness, vulnerability and above all failure of aspirations. Poor people might not be able to achieve their capabilities, but this does not mean that they do not have aspirations they wish to fulfil. The concept of aspirations has been explored in the fields of economics, anthropology, psychology and philosophy, but not extensively in development studies. The aim of the paper is to present a conceptual framework for analysing aspirations based on the capability approach and to apply a new methodology to articulate these aspirations. Using Egypt as a case study, the voices of the poor reveal the interrelationships between failure of aspirations, which not only leads to a downward spiral, but also to an intergenerational transfer of aspirations' failure. The paper concludes that identifying and addressing the causal relationship between poverty, aspirations and wellbeing could be the starting point for effective and more relevant development policies that help poor people to achieve their aspired but unfulfilled capabilities.

**Keywords:** aspirations, poverty, wellbeing

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## 1 Introduction

Poverty is usually associated with powerlessness, failure of aspirations, fears and worries. The fact that poor people are unable to reach their potential, does not – however – mean that they do not have aspirations and capabilities that they wish to fulfil. Poverty is not only a result, but also a cause of failed aspirations (Ray, 2006). Any poverty analysis is therefore incomplete if it fails to account for the aspirations of the poor and to examine the obstacles they face in achieving these aspirations.

The aims of this paper are fourfold: (1) to explore the relationship between poverty, aspirations and wellbeing; (2) to adopt a new conceptual framework for the analysis of poor people's aspirations based on the capability approach; (3) to present a new methodology to identify poor people's aspirations and the reasons for their success or failure in achieving these aspirations; and (4) to demonstrate how various internal and external factors can lead to a downward spiral of failed aspirations among the poor. Using Egypt as a case study, the paper explores poor people's aspired – but unfulfilled – capabilities. It argues that the capabilities to which poor people aspire, but which are unfulfilled, should be identified through adequate 'grounded' methodologies. They should be the entry points for any people-centred 'aspirations-enhancing' development policy.

Section 2 explores the relationship between aspirations, wellbeing and poverty and reviews the main bodies of work that have sought to explore this link. Section 3 adopts the capability approach as a conceptual framework for the analysis of aspirations. To do so, it extends the definition of capabilities from those that are 'achievable' to those that are 'achievable *and* aspired' and explains why such an expansion of the definition is necessary to explore the aspirations of the poor. Section 4 explains the methodology used to articulate poor people's aspired capabilities in two (rural and urban) fieldwork sites in Egypt. Section 5 presents the results of the analysis and identifies the main 'unfulfilled' capabilities of the poor in Egypt. The paper concludes by presenting some policy implications on how poverty reduction strategies can help the poor achieve their aspired capabilities.

## 2 Aspirations, poverty and wellbeing

### 2.1 Defining aspirations

Before proceeding, it is important to define 'aspirations'. Aspirations literally mean 'hopes or ambitions to achieve something'. An aspiration is defined as 'the perceived importance or necessity of goals' (Copestake and Camfield, 2010). It is simply a target that one wishes to achieve (Bernard, Taffesse and Dercon, 2008). Aspirations also

certainly have something to do with wants, preferences, choices, and calculations. And because these factors have been assigned to the discipline of economics, to the domain of the market and to the level of the individual actor ....., they have been large [sic] invisible in the study of culture (Appadurai, 2004: 67).

From an anthropological point of view, though, aspirations are viewed as part of wider ethical and metaphysical ideas derived from cultural norms (Appadurai, 2004: 67).

Aspirations are multidimensional, many-faceted and socially embedded (Appadurai, 2004; Copestake and Camfield, 2010). They might either be complementary or may substitute each other, are usually formed through social interaction and differ from one society to another (Appadurai, 2004). Aspirations can also reflect the extent to which poor people feel that they have control over their future (Bernard, Taffesse and Dercon, 2008: 10). Ray (2003) uses the term 'aspirations' to refer to the 'social grounding of individual desires' (Ray, 2003: 1). He argues that individual desires should not be considered in social isolation, as is the case, for example, with 'consumer preferences' in economics. As aspirations are socially determined, understanding how failure of aspirations happens requires a careful analysis of societies and cultures. Appadurai (2004) explains that in a connected society, for example, it is 'more possible' to achieve aspirations, while in a polarised society, there are no 'linkages' between the rich and the poor, thus rendering it difficult for poor people to achieve their aspirations.

Poor people's aspirations mainly reflect their cognitive world. They reveal the lives that the poor wished to lead but could not. To account for this cognitive dimension of wellbeing, Veenhoven (2000) differentiates between potentiality and actuality – that is between aspired life-chances and achieved life-results. He also points out the difference between external and internal qualities of life: the former relate to the environment in which the individual lives, while the latter focus on the individual him/herself. Unfortunately, instead of exploring what poor people feel internally (for example, their aspirations and fears), most development analyses still mainly focus merely on poor people's external world – that is, their material conditions and the possessions that they have or should have, rather than their wishes or aspirations (Veenhoven, 2000).

To overcome this gap, Copestake and Camfield (2010) argue that development should be perceived as a cognitive process, so as to account for the dynamics and relational aspects of wellbeing. Bernard, Taffesse and Dercon (2008) also point out the need to 'shift the focus away from external constraints and towards the *manifested attributes* of decision-makers' (4 [emphasis in original]). Internal constraints are thus of equal importance in understanding poverty traps as external ones. This is because an individual's cognitive window can limit the effect of role models and hence lead to failure of aspirations.

To understand the cognitive world of the poor, it is therefore essential to examine issues related to their identities and their psychological wellbeing, as well as the sets of beliefs and perceptions that affect their wellbeing. Emphasising these cognitive dimensions of development, Dorward (2009) also conceptualises development as the processes of hanging in, stepping up and stepping out (Dorward, 2009: 131). Dorward (2009) argues that poor people seek to achieve their aspirations mainly through three types of livelihood strategy: (1) maintaining and protecting current wealth, or 'hanging in'; (2) expanding existing activities and assets, or 'stepping up'; and (3) accumulating and investing in new assets, or 'stepping out' (Dorward, 2009: 136). In addition, to achieve their aspirations, poor people have to exercise their voice and their human agency in order to alter the 'terms of recognition'; these are the conditions that prevent them from participating fully in society (Appadurai, 2004). By doing so, poor people will inevitably also widen what social psychologists call their 'locus of control' – that is, the extent to which individuals think they can control events affecting their lives (Rotter, 1954). This analysis thus seeks to bring these cognitive dimensions of

wellbeing back to development analyses. It emphasises the need to take 'the social and psychological environment of the poor seriously' (Banerjee, Bénabou and Mookherjee, 2006: li).

## **2.2 Aspirations as an interdisciplinary concept**

The concept of 'aspirations' is also interdisciplinary. Most of the literature on aspirations is based mainly in the disciplines of (behavioural) economics, anthropology, psychology and philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Social psychologists are interested in the processes of goal-setting and their effect on performance outcomes (Heath, Larrick and Wu, 1964). In the field of economics, a number of scholars have been also concerned with the concept of 'aspirations' and sought, for example, to link it to cooperation and game theory (Karandikar et al., 1998), to market mechanisms and price changes (Gilboa and Schmeidler, 2001) and more recently to reference dependence and income (Castilla, 2010) and to chronic poverty (Ghosal, Dalton and Mani, 2010). Others developed an aspiration adaptation theory to unfold the dynamics of aspirations (Simon, 1979; Selten, 1999). These models, however, paid little attention to how aspirations are formed. Ray (2006) tried to overcome this gap by presenting a conceptual framework that examines the process of formation of aspirations formation, and assesses the impact of aspirations on an individual's behaviour. He introduced the concepts of aspirations window and aspirations gap. The former constitutes the individual's cognitive world and what s/he views as attainable, while the latter is 'the distance between what an individual might aspire to and the conditions she currently finds herself in' (Ray, 2003: 9).

Ray (2006) argues that aspirations are usually drawn from the lives and achievements of 'similar' people, ideals or role models within this aspirations window. What matters, however, is the aspirations gap. He argues that an individual who is poor will exert minimal effort if the aspiration gap is either too high or too low, as this will reduce his/her incentive to raise standards and make investments to narrow this gap. Accordingly, aspirations should therefore be perceived neither as too distant to be reached nor as too small to be worth achieving. Ray (2006) concludes that aspiration failure mainly happens when poor people consider the aspirations gap to be too large and hence – incorrectly – think that there is no way to achieve their aspirations. This is especially the case in polarised societies, where the poor might not have met any role models who have achieved these aspirations and hence think they are unattainable. Recent empirical research applied Ray's framework in developing countries, for example in Ethiopia (Bernard, Taffesse and Dercon, 2008) or used it to develop aspirations indicators and examine how internal constraints can be the cause of aspiration failure and poverty traps (Ghosal, Dalton and Mani, 2010).

The concept of aspirations also has been of interest to anthropologists. They, however, criticise the economists' restrictive view of aspirations as immediate and visible wants. Appadurai (2004), for example, explains that:

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the limited scope of this paper, the works on aspirations in the field of psychology and philosophy will not be reviewed. This, however, does not in any way undermine their importance, but is mainly to maintain the focus of the analysis.

This last, most immediate, visible inventory of wants has often led students of consumption and of poverty to lose sight of the intermediate and higher order normative contexts within which these wants are gestated and brought into view. And thus decontextualized, they are usually downloaded to the individual and offloaded to the science of calculation and the market – economics (Appadurai, 2004: 68).

To overcome this restrictive view of aspirations, Appadurai (2004) emphasises the importance of the '*capacity to aspire*', perceived as a navigational and cultural capacity (Appadurai, 2004: 69).

The capacity to aspire is about how a group (and the individuals within it) succeed in reducing the costs of developing a culture of aspirations by collectively envisioning their future, and their capacity to share this future, through influencing other groups, the government, and other factors in their physical and social environment (Rao and Walton, 2004: 25).

This capacity is important, because in some cultures the wellbeing of individuals is not only related to the pursuit of one's own goals, but also to other collectivist goals, such as making others happy or meeting their expectations (Tiberius, 2004). This analysis therefore seeks to reinstate the importance of the relationship between aspirations and culture. The importance of culture lies not only in the fact that it is a constitutive part of development, but also because it affects economic behaviour, political participation, social solidarity and social capital. More importantly, culture plays a major role in value formation (Sen, 2004: 41) and thus has an important impact on aspirations. The previously reviewed literature focuses on the importance of aspirations and examines the processes by which they are formed; however, it does *not* explore which aspirations the poor have, nor does it assess whether the poor have succeeded (or not) in achieving them. The aim of this paper is to fill in this gap. The next section explores the relationship between aspirations and poverty.

### **2.3 Aspirations and the poor**

Aspirations are not only linked to individual preferences and to culture, but are also crucial for the wellbeing of poor people, their life satisfaction and their capabilities. Previously, the wants and needs of professionals have taken precedence over the wants and needs of the poor – hence the need to 'enable poor people to analyze and articulate their own needs' and to put their priorities first (Chambers, 1995: 173). Due to the importance of aspirations for poverty reduction, more recently, scholars in development studies have attempted to link the concept of aspirations to moving out of poverty (Krishna, 2006; Krishna et al., 2006). Policymakers have also started to talk about the need to rebuild the public realm to overcome the poverty of aspirations (Jowell, 2005) and have pointed out the importance of building a culture of aspirations – through education – to help the youth in poor communities overcome their social exclusion (Sinclair, McKendrick and Scott, 2010). The relationship between aspirations and poverty is thus mutually reinforcing. On the one hand, poverty itself leads to a failure of aspirations, as it 'stifles dreams, or at least the process of *attaining* dreams' thus leading to a self-perpetuating trap (Ray, 2003: 1[emphasis in original]). On the other hand, the capacity to aspire can itself help poor people to improve their conditions, as 'it can ... strengthen the poor as partners in the battle against poverty' (Appadurai, 2004: 82). Development efforts therefore need to strengthen the capacity of poor people to aspire by: (1) studying the

processes of consensus production among poor people; (2) understanding local cultures in which aspirations are located; and, finally, (3) nurturing the voice of the poor as 'it is through the capacity to aspire that the exercise of voices by the poor will be extended' (Appadurai, 2004: 83).

The relationship between poverty and aspirations is also a complex one, simply because 'the realities of poor people are local, complex, diverse and dynamic' (Chambers, 1995: 172). It is not only the conditions of poverty or inequality that lead to aspirations' failure; social polarisation and the lack of social connectedness also negatively affect the aspirations of poor people and prevent them from achieving these aspirations (Ray, 2006). As poverty is not only associated with material deprivation, insecurity and vulnerability, but also with aspirations' failure, it is important to explore the different and changing cultural aspects of poverty that have a crucial impact on the aspirations and actions of the poor (Copestake and Camfield, 2010: 629). Ghosal, Dalton and Mani (2010) identify three main channels through which low aspirations are linked to poverty: (1) the opportunity channel (when poor people's objective opportunity to achieve their aspirations is small); (2) the information channel (poor people witness few success stories); and (3) the internal channel (deprivation has negative psychological effects). By bringing 'aspirations' back into the analysis of poverty, 'aspirations [can therefore] become a valuable analytical device and a critical entry point for policy relevant to poverty reduction and ultimate socio-economic transformation' (Bernard, Taffesse and Dercon, 2008: 8).

The question then is: *is it enough for development policies to score highly in macro-economic indicators or should these policies mainly enhance the living conditions of the poor and help them achieve their aspirations?* This paper argues for the latter. It stresses that the focus of development policies should be to help poor people to expand their capabilities and achieve their aspirations. It also points out that:

in strengthening the capacity to aspire, ... , especially among the poor, the future-oriented logic of development could find a natural ally, and the poor could find resources required to contest and alter the conditions of their own poverty (Appadurai, 2004: 59).

Although the poor are not a homogenous group, 'it is never hard to identify threads and themes in the worldviews of the poor. These are strikingly concrete and local in expression but impressively general in their reach' (Appadurai, 2004: 65). However, have these 'threads of aspirations' been sufficiently articulated?

The short answer is: no. Despite the importance of poor people's aspirations in guiding development processes, very few analyses have been conducted to articulate these aspirations or the means to help the poor to fulfil them. These few exceptions include the two volumes of *Voices of the Poor* (Narayan et al., 2000 a; b), *Moving out of Poverty* studies (Narayan and Petesch, 2007) as well as Clark (2002), Copestake and Camfield (2010) and White (2008). Building on these previous attempts, this paper seeks to overcome this gap, not only by emphasising the importance of aspirations for the wellbeing of the poor, but also by presenting a conceptual framework and a methodology to articulate these aspirations.

## 2.4 Aspirations and wellbeing

Although poor people often express their choices in terms of specific goods and wants, these wants are usually tied to general norms and higher perceptions of the good life (Appadurai, 2004: 68). It therefore follows that:

Aspirations to the good life are part of some sort of system of ideas...which locates them in a larger map of local ideas and beliefs .... At the same time, aspirations to the good life tend to quickly dissolve into more densely local ideas about marriage, work, leisure, convenience, respectability, friendship, health, and virtue. More narrow still, these intermediate norms often stay beneath the surface and emerge only as specific wants and choices (Appadurai, 2004: 68).

Unfortunately, most wellbeing analyses focus on these immediate and specific wants of the poor and tend to ignore aspirations and general wellbeing perceptions. Copestake and Camefield (2010) are an exception, as they demonstrate the multiplicity of goals and perceived needs that affect the wellbeing of poor people and stress the importance of understanding what poor people 'need and want most' (Copestake and Camfield, 2010: 628). To link research on subjective wellbeing with poverty as failure of capacity to aspire, Copesetake and Camfield (2010) define wellbeing as a function of the gap between individual aspirations and satisfaction with achieving them. Despite its contribution, however, this attempt – to link wellbeing and aspirations – did *not* build a conceptual framework to analyse the aspirations of the poor. This analysis overcomes this gap by proposing such a framework which links aspirations and capabilities, and by introducing the concept of 'aspired capabilities' – explained in detail in the next section.

## 3 From achievable to aspired capabilities

This paper adopts the capability approach as a conceptual framework for the analysis of poor people's aspirations. The capability approach distinguishes mainly between functionings ('what the person is succeeding in doing or being' [Sen, 1987a: 19] or his/her actual achievements) and capabilities, which are 'notions of freedom' (Sen, 1987b: 36) reflecting the various choices an individual has the freedom to select from to achieve the life that s/he values and has reason to value (Sen, 1987a; Sen, 1992). The distinction between functionings and capabilities is thus that between the 'realized and the effectively possible [...] achievements [...] and freedoms or valuable options' (Robeyns, 2005: 95). The process of converting commodities and capabilities into actual functionings depends on various social and personal factors (Sen, 1987a: 17). In sum, while functionings lead to wellbeing, capabilities are intrinsically and instrumentally important as they represent the person's freedoms and choices to achieve this wellbeing.

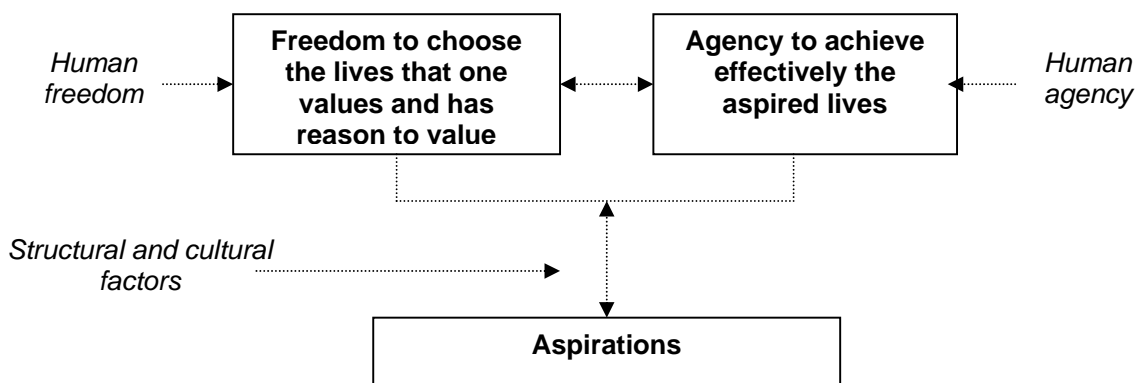


### 3.1 Why the capability approach?

The capability approach is a suitable conceptual framework for the analysis of the poor's aspirations for various reasons. First – as pointed out earlier – aspirations and culture are closely related. Culture is extremely crucial for people's aspirations as it affects human values and perceptions of wellbeing and hence can determine the capabilities that one aspires to and the 'type of life' that one values as well as his/her reasons for valuing it. Through its impact on people's perceptions of 'the possible' and its restrictions on what one 'should/should not' aspire to, culture is also of intrinsic and instrumental importance for achieving one's aspirations. The capability approach is therefore an appropriate framework for the analysis of aspirations because it accounts for the importance of culture in the valuation and achievement of diverse human capabilities.

Secondly, the CA is a freedom-centred approach, as Sen states that 'freedom is the issue; not commodities, nor utility as such' (Sen, 1984: 86). Freedom is viewed in a positive sense, that is to be free to do something and have the capability to live well (Sen, 1984: 78). This focus on 'positive freedoms' is crucial for this analysis. When the poor suffer from failed aspirations, they are unable to 'be' or 'do' what they value and have reason to value. To overcome this failure, they need to have the freedom as well as ability to use their human agency. These two concepts – freedom and agency – are central in the capability approach and hence render it a suitable framework for this analysis. Aspirations are based on individuals' *freedoms* to achieve the lives that they aspire to and their ability to use their human *agency* to effectively achieve these aspired lives (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Aspirations, freedoms and agency**



Source: author

### 3.2 From achievable to aspired capabilities

Due to its focus on interpersonal and intercultural variations, human freedoms and human agency, the capability approach is thus a suitable conceptual framework for analysing poor people's aspirations. However, the main constraint in adopting the capability approach as a conceptual framework is *its current – restricted –* definition of capabilities. According to Sen, each individual has a capability set which is 'the set of functioning vectors within his or her *reach*' (Sen, 1985: 201[emphasis added]). Capabilities are defined only as 'the various alternative functioning bundles he or she *can achieve* through choice' (Sen, 1987a: 18[emphasis added]).

More recently, Sen reaffirmed his focus only on the achievable rather than the aspired capabilities stating that:

the focus of the capability approach is thus not just on what a person actually ends up doing, but also on what she is in fact **able to do**, whether or not she chooses to make use of that opportunity (Sen, 2009: 235 [emphasis added]).

He explains that – in contrast to the basic needs approach – his approach goes beyond achievements, to focus on opportunities and capabilities. He adds that:

Capabilities are defined derivatively on functionings, and include *inter alia* all the information on the functioning combinations that a person **can choose**. The cluster of functionings actually chosen is obviously among the feasible combinations (Sen, 2009: 236 [emphasis added in bold]).

The question however is: *what about the capabilities that poor people might value and wish to achieve but cannot?* The current definition of capabilities is restrictive, as it focuses only on the reachable and achievable choices and does *not* account for those capabilities that a person might value and has reason to value, but is unable to achieve. Should these capabilities simply be neglected? Definitely not. These capabilities are extremely important, given the various economic, social and cultural constraints that prevent poor people from achieving them.

Here is an example to illustrate the importance of these currently neglected capabilities. A poor girl in Upper Egypt wishes to be educated, but cannot go to school, either due to her parents' refusal or their inability to pay her school expenses. According to the current definition of capabilities, in terms of the alternative functioning bundles an individual can achieve through choice, the capability of being educated is simply *not* present in this girl's capability set, because she is unable to choose it! Neglecting such an important aspect of her wellbeing, however, has major ethical and practical considerations. The capability to be educated is one that this girl values and has reason to value; nevertheless, she is unable to achieve it, because of cultural and economic constraints. Therefore, by restricting the capability set only on those capabilities that are achievable, the capability

approach somehow leaves out these important capabilities that can have a profound impact on poor people's wellbeing.

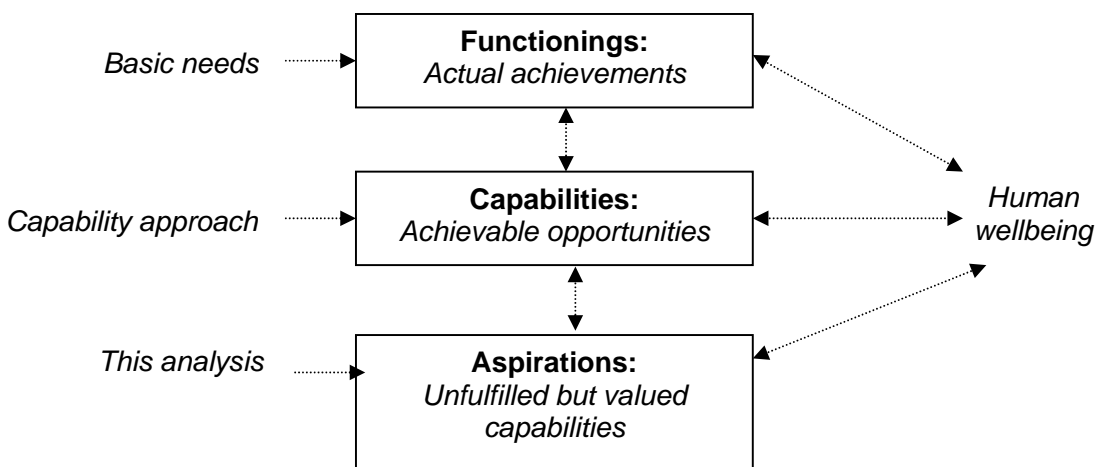
Although one cannot deny that the shift – in the capability approach - from focusing on achievements to opportunities is crucial for the analysis of human wellbeing, there is an urgent need to expand the definition of capabilities from the achievable to the achievable *and* aspired capabilities. Aspired capabilities are defined as: *those alternative functioning bundles that the individual values and has reason to value but is unable to achieve due to various structural and institutional constraints*. Articulating these aspired capabilities can help policy-makers identify the areas where poor people suffer from capability deficits and hence design policies that enable the poor to achieve them. The shift from achievable to 'achievable and aspired capabilities' will thus allow us to account not only for the opportunities that a person *can actually* choose from, but also those capabilities that s/he aspires to.

Although some scholars examined the link between capabilities and happiness (Veenhoven, 2010), a few explored the link between capabilities and aspirations. By introducing the concept of aspired capabilities, this paper seeks to overcome this gap by emphasising the mutual relationship between capabilities and aspirations. In exploring the link between aspirations and capabilities, Appadurai (2004) argued that:

They are two sides of the same coin... The capacity to aspire provides an ethical horizon within which more concrete capabilities can be given meaning, substance, and sustainability. Conversely, the exercise and nurture of these capabilities verifies and authorizes the capacity to aspire and moves it away from wishful thinking to thoughtful wishing (Appadurai, 2004: 82).

Figure 2 below explains how this paper seeks to extend the analysis of human capabilities from achievable to achievable *and* aspired capabilities. The figure also demonstrates the interactive relationship between achievements, opportunities and aspirations and their impact on human wellbeing.

**Figure 2. From achievable to aspired capabilities**



Source: author.

## 4 Methodology for articulating poor people's aspirations

### 4.1 Methodology

In order to identify these capabilities to which poor people aspire, but which are unfulfilled, a new methodology was developed for this research. This methodology adopts a grounded approach and uses qualitative research methods to articulate the voices and subjective wellbeing perceptions of poor people. As aspirations are very subjective, it was necessary to choose a suitable method that 'presents a socially and culturally grounded understanding of the different dimensions of well-being' (White, 2008: 6) and that allows poor people to voice their aspirations without distorting these voices. To articulate these aspirations, two open-ended questions were asked:

- What are the three most important things that you wished to achieve in life but couldn't?
- Why couldn't you achieve them?

These questions were part of a detailed wellbeing questionnaire (with 92 open-ended questions) which was conducted with 80 respondents at two sites (Manshiet Nasser in Cairo and rural villages in Menia in Upper Egypt). This analysis focuses only on one section of the questionnaire: that which explores poor people's aspired but unfulfilled capabilities, and examines the reasons for their failure to achieve them. The remainder of the questionnaire explores four broader aspects of poor people's wellbeing: general, material, social and mental wellbeing. The general wellbeing section examines poor people's life satisfaction, their perceptions on the elements of a good life and their problems. The material wellbeing analyses a number of capabilities, such as income generation, education, employment, health, housing, transportation and safety. The social wellbeing assessed the degree of communal respect and trust, fair treatment and mutual support in poor communities as well as poor people's relationships with their families, friends and local institutions and their degree of political freedom. Finally, poor people's mental wellbeing is explored by asking them about their leisure time, their fears and worries, and their ability to plan their lives.

In the questionnaire, prior coding was purposefully not used, to avoid imposing of the researchers' views. Codes were later derived from the recurring themes identified through a careful analysis of the narratives of the poor's voices (Moris and Copestake, 1993; Kanbur and Shaffer, 2007). The applied methodology is slightly similar to the applications of gap theories, where goals or aspirations were compared with the person's evaluation of how far they had achieved these goals (Calman, 1984; Michalos, 1985; Copestake and Camfield, 2010). Unlike these previous attempts, however, this methodology not only allows the respondents to list which aspirations they have, but it also explores *why* they have failed to achieve these aspirations. The main contribution of this methodology is the fact that it avoids the aggregation of individual aspirations and their mere reduction to simple numbers, because ironically 'the stress on perceptions and their numerical coding, can divorce "the subjective" from the *subject*' (White, 2008 [emphasis in original]). This methodology also accounts for the structural factors that affect the achievement of these aspirations, thus helping policymakers and civil society organisations to identify adequate entry points for their interventions that can help poor people to achieve these aspirations.

## 4.2 Why subjective perceptions?

After explaining which methodology was used to articulate the aspirations of the poor, it is important to explain the reasons for choosing this methodology. First, this methodology simply gives poor people a voice. The open-ended questions enhance 'the capability of the poor to have and to cultivate "voice"' (Appadurai, 2004: 63). Only by expressing their voices, their aspirations and their unfulfilled capabilities, can poor people effectively enhance their capacity to change the terms of recognition. Second, aspirations are very subjective concepts. To identify these aspirations, it is therefore necessary to articulate the *subjective* perceptions of the poor. As pointed out earlier, aspirations are also closely linked to culture, hence the need to understand poor people's perceptions and to unfold the time- and context-specific cultural aspects of poverty (Copestake and Camefield, 2010). Finally, understanding aspirations is crucial not only for better development outcomes, but also for the empowerment of the poor. White (2008) argues that the process of thinking about one's own life can be empowering in itself. In sum, this methodology not only asks poor people directly about their unfulfilled aspired capabilities and the reasons for their failure to achieve them, but also points out the structural impediments that hinder poor people from realising these aspirations. By so doing, this helps policymakers to take adequate steps to remove such impediments.

While pointing out the aforementioned advantages of this methodology, its limitations are also acknowledged. Such limitations include: the danger of bias and response shift (Schwartz and Sprangers, 1999) and the risk of adaptive preferences (Sen, 1999) and false consciousness (Engels, 1893; Elster, 1982). Adaptive preferences refer to the 'adjustment of people's aspirations to feasible possibilities' (Elster, 1982: 219), when the poor 'come to terms with their deprivation because of the sheer necessity of survival' (Sen, 1999: 63). Despite the danger of adaptive preferences, this research does *not* consider them necessarily to be bad. This is mainly because it is impossible to imagine how much poor people would suffer in the absence of adaptation (Clark, 2009). One cannot deny that poor people adjust their aspirations to feasible options and that they are subject to different kinds of social conditioning, for example through religious and cultural norms; nevertheless, this does not mean that they are unable to make informed judgements. In the 21st century, most poor people, even in the remotest areas, are connected to the globalised world through radio, television and the internet (Clark, 2009). It would be therefore too 'paternalistic' to assume that the poor are unable to make rationale choices and to use the 'adaptive preferences' argument to undermine the importance of their voices and aspirations. One needs to acknowledge that 'individual preferences, like them or not, have be taken neat: anything goes. The downside of this is that we may have to accept preferences that we do not very much like' (Collard, 2006: 339). Despite these limitations, subjective data can still be useful as explanatory variables (Bertrand and Mullainathan, 2001), as it allows for the articulation of the voices and narratives of the poor to understand which aspirations they failed to achieve and why. It thus conforms with Appadurai's argument that:

any developmental project ... should develop a set of tools for identifying the cultural map of aspirations ... This will require careful and thoughtful surveys, which can move from specific

goods and technologies to the narratives within which they are understood and thence to the norms which guide the narratives (Appadurai, 2004: 83).

## 5 Articulating poor people's aspirations in Egypt

### 5.1 Unfulfilled capabilities

Using this methodology, this research explored the unfulfilled capabilities of poor people in Egypt and revealed that the poor suffer from capability deficits, mainly in two primary areas: jobs and education. As Table 1 shows, most of the respondents had either failed to find a job or were employed under unsatisfactory working conditions. They had also failed to a large extent either to continue their education or to study their chosen subjects. Although they indicated jobs as a main element of a good life and a main problem (in the data generated through the rest of the questionnaire), education appeared *for the first time*, as a priority area for the respondents. This is particularly relevant, as capability poverty is not only concerned with poor people's incomes, but also with other non-materialistic capabilities that they would strive to achieve. Getting married or being happily married, living in a comfortable independent house and fulfilling their children's needs are also among the capabilities that poor people usually fail to fulfil. In addition, some of the poor wished to play a more active communal role, practise their hobbies, fulfil religious duties or even travel, but they simply could not.

**Table 1: Most unfulfilled capabilities of poor people in Egypt**

- 1) Job: Finding a job/working in a satisfactory job
- 2) Education: Continuing education/studying what they wish
- 3) Income: Having sufficient income/ asset ownership
- 4) Marriage: (a) Getting married/being happily married/(b) Housing: living in a comfortable/independent house/(c) Children's capabilities: fulfilling children's capabilities/needs
- 5) Living in better surroundings (social and physical)
- 6) Communal role: having an active communal role/Practising one's hobbies
- 7) Fulfilling religious duties
- 8) Travelling abroad

Source: author.

After identifying the aspired but unfulfilled capabilities of the poor people in our sample, it was important to examine the reasons for the failure of these aspirations, and to point out the structural impediments that prevented the poor from achieving their aspired capabilities.

In the field of employment, nepotism and the lack of job opportunities are the two main reasons for this capability deficit. In many cases, poor people had no connections, entered into fake competitions or simply never received any response to their job applications. They also lacked

adequate awareness and information about the availability of jobs, and suffered from unequal treatment when they were called for an interview. Women found it difficult to work, due to their husbands' refusal and their inability to balance their job and household responsibilities in the absence of adequate childcare facilities. Those who succeeded in finding 'a' job still suffered from failure to fulfil their aspirations, due to job insecurity and bad working conditions. In one case, the respondent had been working in a government office for 17 years on a temporary contract! The scarcity of employment opportunities also forces poor people to accept jobs that do not necessarily fulfil their aspirations. This leads to further frustration and disappointment, when they have to perform these jobs on a daily basis. The absence of encouragement and the difficulty of finding job opportunities abroad render it even more difficult for the poor to overcome their failed aspirations in the job domain. Those who were uneducated or who lacked job experience suffered the most from such a failure.

Education is the second domain in which the poor suffered from failed aspirations. Low educational attainment, high educational expenses and health problems are among the main reasons for this failure. In many cases, the respondents could not continue their studies or ended up studying subjects they did not like because of their low school performance, especially when they had to work while studying. Given their limited income, the high cost of schooling and private lessons was another factor that discouraged poor families from educating their children. Those respondents who suffered from health problems, or from the death of their breadwinner, had to forego their educational aspirations to provide for themselves and their families. Women reported high levels of aspirations failure in education, mainly due to their parents' refusal to educate them, or due to their marriage, which usually resulted in them dropping out of school. In rural areas, the limited access and low quality of educational services also discouraged the poor from acquiring their aspired education. Despite these structural factors, some of the respondents pointed out their own personal responsibility for failing to achieve their educational aspirations, due to their reluctance to go to school and their limited ambitions as children, or the bad influence of their peer groups when they were teenagers. Those who tried to educate themselves at later stages in life – through training or illiteracy eradication classes – found it difficult to achieve these aspirations too, due to their extended working hours and their household responsibilities.

Lack of income seems to be the sole major reason for the failure of aspirations in various domains, such as housing, marriage, living in better physical and social surroundings, asset accumulation and starting up one's own business. Pensioners, those suffering from health problems and those working with temporary contracts suffered the most from low income levels. Rising house prices, limited information on affordable housing schemes and the limited role of government rendered it difficult for the poor to fulfil their housing aspirations. High marriage expenses, lack of job security and growing family responsibilities made it hard for young men to fulfil their marriage aspirations. Many women also reported their failure in marriage because of domestic violence and the arranged (and sometimes even forced) nature of this marriage. Low income levels were also the main reasons for poor people's failure to accumulate assets, especially buying agricultural land. The respondents also pointed out various difficulties in starting up their own businesses, due to the lack of funding and of adequate micro-credit schemes, and the difficulty in finding partners and sponsors for these aspired-to new businesses. These failed aspirations lead to a 'downward' spiral, when

one frustration leads to another. One of the respondents summed it up by saying '*I am sick of trying. I feel demoralised*'.

Contrary to common belief, poor people are not only concerned with their own wellbeing, but also with that of their community. In many cases, respondents pointed out their willingness but failure to play an active role in their communities, due to political reasons and the dominance of certain political parties. In addition, they also felt that they lacked the adequate communication skills and income levels to perform such a role.

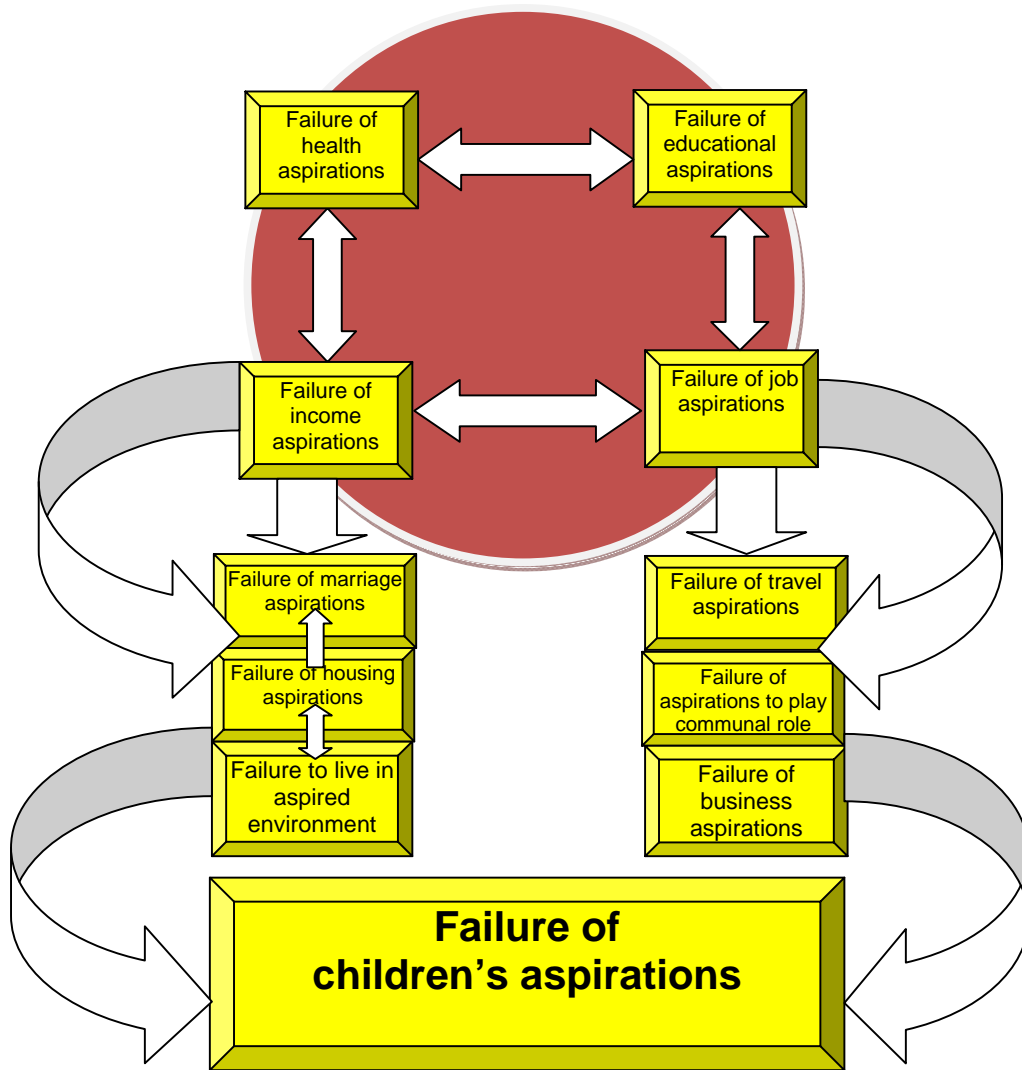
Unfortunately, poor people's failure to achieve their aspired capabilities not only nurtures their feelings of powerlessness and frustration, but also affects their children's capabilities. Due to their limited income and their health problems, the poor, for example, reluctantly had to send their children to work at an early age. Some respondents explained that they were keen to educate their children (to compensate for their own aspirations' failure in this domain). Despite their ongoing efforts to secure better lives for their children, many of the respondents ended up suffering from higher levels of aspirations' failure when their – now educated – children failed to use this education to secure better jobs or to improve their living conditions. One can therefore conclude that – similar to the intergenerational transmission of poverty – there is also an intergenerational transmission of aspirations' failure. This is reflected in two ways. On the one hand, the parents failed to fulfil their children's aspirations, while on the other hand, the children themselves also did not succeed in breaking away from the downward spiral of aspirations' failure. This is how aspirations' failure is transmitted from one generation to another.

Figure 3 below outlines these complex interrelationships between the different capabilities to which poor people aspire but are unable to achieve. It shows how the failure to achieve one capability, for example generating enough income, leads to a *downward spiral of failed aspirations*, which not only affects poor adults, but also their children. Identifying and addressing such causal relationships between aspiration failures could therefore be a good starting point for decision-makers in designing adequate policies that help poor people to overcome the various structural factors that prevent them from achieving their aspired capabilities.

Figure 3 points out the various interconnected structural factors that not only set off a downward spiral of failed aspirations, but also lead to the intergenerational transmission of aspirations' failure. The figure shows that failure to achieve four core aspirations (health, education, employment and income) is the major cause of the downward spiral and the intergenerational transmission of aspirational failure. For example, health problems lead to asset depletion and to dropping out of school, thus causing failure of educational aspirations. This educational failure, in turn, leads to failure of income, job and even marriage aspirations, when the poor fail to obtain high earning jobs and are 'refused' by prospective brides/grooms, due to their low educational levels. As a result of educational failure, poor people have limited communication skills and restricted access to information, thus preventing them from playing a major role in their community or from achieving



**Figure 3. The downward spiral and intergenerational transmission of aspirations' failure**



their job aspirations. The failure of job aspirations is also caused by lack of income and failure of educational aspirations, as well as by the limited job availability, nepotism and asymmetrical information on jobs. Poor people's failure to obtain their aspired jobs also prevents them from achieving other aspirations, such as securing good income, travelling, playing a communal role and starting up their own businesses. The diagram also shows how the failure of achieving income aspirations is a central and major cause of aspirations' failure in many wellbeing domains, such as health, education, employment, asset accumulation, housing and marriage. However, this is not to imply that lack of income is the only reason for aspirations' failure; social factors also play a crucial role in affecting the capacity to achieve capabilities such as being educated and getting married. Despite their immense efforts to secure a better future for their children, various structural factors

hinder poor people from fulfilling their children's aspirations, for example educating them, marrying them off and so on. This in turn leads to failure of the aspirations of the parents *and* their children – that is, to the intergenerational transmission of aspirations' failure.

To break this downward spiral, there is a need for carefully designed development policies that not only take into account the voices and experiences of the poor, but also consider the various causal relationships and structural economic, social and cultural factors that lead to the failure of these aspirations.

## **6 Conclusion**

In conclusion, this paper adopted the capability approach as a conceptual framework for the analysis of poor people's aspirations. It argued for the need to extend the definition of capabilities from the achievable to 'achievable and aspired' capabilities. Given the various structural and social constraints on poor people's capabilities, such an extension is necessary to account for the various capabilities to which the poor aspire but are unable to achieve. The paper presented a new methodology to articulate these aspirations by asking poor people about their unfulfilled capabilities and the reasons for their failure to achieve them. Using Egypt as a case study, the analysis revealed that poor people suffer from a 'capability deficit' in two main areas: job creation and education. If therefore the Egyptian government were to design a policy to 'help the poor fulfil their aspirations', it would need to provide poor people with adequate employment opportunities and good education.

The analysis revealed two dynamics of aspirational failure: a downward spiral and an intergenerational transmission. The former happens when one aspiration failure leads to another, while the latter reflects the failure of many parents in poor communities to fulfil the aspirations of their children, thus ending up transmitting their failed aspirations to the next generation. The paper concludes by pointing out that helping poor people to achieve these aspirations should be the starting point for any people-centred policy – one that puts the needs of the people as its priority and their aspirations as its guide. If policymakers remain reluctant to adopt such people-centred, aspirations-enhancing policies that help the poor achieve their aspirations, unfortunately, poor people will remain afraid to aspire and unable to reach a better life.

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