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Towards a post-neoliberal social policy: capabilities, human rights and social empowerment

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ABSTRACT

Drawing from the theoretical and empirical results of a European research project, this paper tentatively elaborates a post-neoliberal framework for social policy and welfare reform. We argue that for moving beyond neoliberalism it is not sufficient to just increase the generosity of social policies: what is also needed is 'social empowerment', i.e. processes of democratization of social policymaking that effectively redistribute power in society, making welfare institutions increasingly accountable and responsive to citizens, including marginalized ones. Building on reflections and learnings emerging from our work in the research project, we show that a capability and human rights informed participatory action research involving civil society organizations, marginalized citizens and academic researchers, can offer potential pathways forward to advance a post-neoliberal social policy.

KEYWORDS

Neoliberalism; social policy; capability approach; human rights; democracy; participatory action research

Introduction

Adopting a critical perspective on policies implies that social reforms must be judged not only in terms of how they improve the quality of life of subaltern groups but also in terms of how and how far they create conditions conducive over time to a break with existing relations of domination (Jessop and Sum 2016, 108). In this context, critical policy studies are often concerned with the role that discourse plays in sustaining hegemony and domination (Fairclough 2013; Howarth 2010; Jessop 2010). Since social change always involves a struggle about the power and legitimacy of ideological meanings, taking a critical perspective on policy analysis requires not only to evaluate whether or not a specific policy or program 'works' but also to study how it relates to the existing social system, while providing a critique of the latter in terms of the normative ideals and the socio-political and cultural assumptions that underlie it (Fischer 2016, 97). However, the transformative potential of discourse is also emphasized, e.g. when social movements that 'lack the power of position' develop oppositional discourses, allowing them to gain 'power from their ideas' (Schmidt 2011, 120). Discourse then can become a resource for emancipatory social change and an essential element for promoting justice and democracy.

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In this paper, we focus on the development of post-neoliberal discourses in social policy. Building on the results of the cross-European RE-InVEST project ('Rebuilding an inclusive, value-based Europe of solidarity and trust through social investments'), we tentatively elaborate a normative framework for a post-neoliberal social policy, discussing the potential role that scholars, civil society organizations and (marginalized) citizens could play in developing and implementing it.[1] The core aim of RE-InVEST was to re-conceptualize 'social investment' from a human rights and capability approach perspective and to achieve transformative social change through co-constructed participatory action on poverty and inequality. In recent decades, 'social investment' emerged as a progressive policy paradigm for overcoming neoliberalism in social policy and welfare state reform (Hemerijck 2018). Embraced by various organizations such as the World Bank, the OECD and the European Union, social investment focuses on improving individuals' human capital (e.g. health and education), on facilitating labor market inclusion (e.g. of women, through the provision of childcare services) as well as on interventions aimed at preventing social problems to emerge (with a special emphasis on investing in children's education). Emphasising the positive economic consequences of social policy, social investment undoubtedly offers a valuable perspective on welfare reform, which potentially advances social justice, e.g. reducing poverty, unemployment and social exclusion; enhancing equality of opportunities through the improvement of disadvantaged children's education; promoting greater gender equality in the labor market.

In the welfare state literature, social investment is generally regarded as an alternative to neoliberalism because it promotes social policy (e.g. Hemerijck 2018). However, this view relies on a rather narrow definition of both social policy – which is identified with welfare benefits and services – and neoliberalism, which is defined as welfare retrenchment, i.e. the reduction of social provision in the welfare state. Instead, neoliberalism does not necessarily entail the reduction of social policy in quantitative terms. Focusing on the 'qualitative' dimensions of social citizenship reveals that social policy in neoliberalism may be maintained – or even extended – but its *logics*, *goals* and *processes* are deeply shaped by neoliberal principles: rather than following a political-democratic rationale, social policy is de-politicized, following either a moral or an economic logic (or a mixture of the two); rather than challenging power inequalities in society, social policy stabilizes or even reinforces them; and rather than involving democratic practices and struggles within a politicized civil society, social policy processes are technocratic, elite-driven and implemented from the top-down (Laruffa 2022b). From this perspective, the presence of *democratization processes* aimed at revitalizing the political-democratic dimension of social citizenship and at redistributing political power in society is the central factor that distinguishes alternatives to neoliberalism from social-inclusive versions of neoliberalism (Laruffa 2022b).

In order to provide an alternative to neoliberalism, the goal should be not only to improve people's living conditions, but also to advance democratic power, enhancing and deepening democracy through 'social empowerment', whereby state power and economic powers are subordinated to the social power of civil society (Wright 2013). Since the neoliberal state is 'shaped by oligarchical influences', the challenge for building a post-neoliberal social policy is that of making the state 'democratically accountable to the citizen' (Powell 2009, 57), insuring

that welfare state policies and provision are co-constructed by citizens. This in turn assigns a key role to 'civil society'. In the past, collective organizations such as trade unions, cooperatives and various mutual associations played a crucial role in the development of welfare states. Today civil society organizations are again being called upon to reimagine themselves once more as essential actors of progressive transformation and democratization (Powell 2009). In particular, since neoliberalism involves a process of marketization that is global in scale, a *global* civil society asserting *human rights* is needed (Burawoy 2015). Potential allies of civil society in overcoming neoliberal social policy are those academics that – rather than acting as policy 'experts' who develop solutions to social problems already defined – engage with civil society in a values-based dialogue on the goals of society (Burawoy 2005). These 'public' scholars work together with various social actors in co-defining social problems, co-producing solutions and co-determining pathways to transformation.

Hence, in order to theorize a post-neoliberal social policy – and how to realize it through welfare state reform – we draw from these different elements on the role of the 'citizen', of civil society and of public social science.

In this context, we explore in particular the potential of a framework centered on 'capability' and human rights for theorizing and implementing a post-neoliberal social policy. The Capability Approach (CA) was originally theorized by Amartya Sen for re-thinking the meaning of development (Sen 1999). The central idea of this approach is that development should be assessed not in terms of economic growth but rather with respect to its contribution to human wellbeing, defined as the *real freedom that people enjoy to lead the kind of lives they have reason to value* (Sen 1999, 18). The CA can be a valuable framework for developing a post-neoliberal approach in social policy for three reasons. First, this approach shifts the focus of policies away from a narrow economic lens (e.g. economic growth) and toward what intrinsically matters to people, i.e. valuable 'beings' and 'doings' such as being healthy and participating in society. Second, the centrality of substantive or 'real' freedoms implies a shift of focus away from merely formal rights – including 'human rights' – written on paper in laws and constitutions, toward 'real' rights that make a difference in people's lives. Third, the CA is concerned not only with the reduction of poverty and inequalities but also with the improvement of democratic governance.

In the following section we argue that social investment – while advancing social justice with respect to austerity and welfare retrenchment – ultimately fails to provide a comprehensive alternative to neoliberal social policy because it neglects the need for democratization (i.e. the redistribution of power in society). The subsequent sections theorize a post-neoliberal social policy – and a democratic path to its achievement – drawing from the theoretical framework, the methodological approach and some key findings of the RE-InVEST project, which involved academics, civil society organizations (such as trade unions and NGOs) and – through the implementation of participatory action research – marginalized social groups. In the conclusion, we argue that in order to provide a transformative alternative to neoliberal social policy, the CA needs to embrace a political-collective understanding of empowerment, going beyond the economic and individualistic interpretations of this approach that are today dominant in social policy.

Social investment: promoting social policy within neoliberalism

In the contemporary context, one of the dominant attempts to design social policy beyond neoliberalism is represented by 'social investment' (Hemerijck 2018; Morel, Palier, and Palme 2012). This consists of a social policy paradigm that emphasizes investing in people's human capital with a view to promoting employment for marginalized groups such as low-skilled unemployed and women. Social investment also focuses on preventive interventions – e.g. investing in children in the early years (0–3), through high quality childcare services – rather than on fixing social problems once that they have emerged. The emphasis on promoting productivity, employment and prevention allows reframing social policies as economic investments contributing to economic growth, competitiveness and public savings. Despite its many important merits, social investment has significant limitations.

Firstly, social investment as a policy discourse excessively emphasizes the economic rationale at the expense of reference to values, such as social justice. The reference to ethical principles that characterized early efforts to promote social rights is replaced by an economic-instrumental rationality that emphasizes 'efficiency', 'effectiveness', 'evidence-based policies', the 'quantification' of policy outcomes and their assessment in light of a 'cost-benefit calculation', which in turn also strengthens 'the bond that joins knowledge and politics', empowering 'nonpolitical and expert authorities' (Busso 2017, 431–34). Thus, social investment tends to adopt a de-politicized/technocratic approach to welfare reform.

Secondly, social investment chiefly frames empowerment in economic terms. Individuals are conceived as 'human capital' rather than as democratic citizens, subjects of social rights or carers who flourish through time spent with one's family (Leibetseder 2018; Lister 2003; Saraceno 2015). By defining empowerment in economic terms social investment obscures other – more transformative – forms of political empowerment, which would allow structures of power, oppression and domination to be challenged. Moreover, the focus is on the empowerment of *single individuals* with no consideration for collective action. Individuals' economic empowerment is not accompanied by a political empowerment of citizens within broader collective actors in society such as trade unions, social movements, civil society organizations and political parties that have the capacity to substantially re-shape society. This process of individualization of social policy marginalizes the idea of welfare as a citizen-oriented, collective and political matter. This contrasts with the historical development of welfare states, which involved struggles of collective actors (labor movements, political parties, and civil society organizations) and politicized modes of governance (Busso 2017). Instead, emancipation is now framed in individualistic terms and identified with market participation while a central function of social policy has become the disciplining of individuals to promote their self-sufficiency, transforming them into successful market actors (Busso 2017, 435–438).

Thirdly, social investment tends to involve the co-optation of civil society organizations, which are conceived mainly as de-politicized efficient and innovative service providers. This is visible in the emphasis on 'social entrepreneurship' as a necessary complement of social investment (Jenson 2017), which regards civil society organizations as partners and co-operators in the provision and financing of social policy at the expense

of their role as political actors, thereby marginalizing explicit conflict relationships with the state and powerful economic actors. This again contrasts with the 'intensity and explicitness of conflicts between different actors that went along with the development of the welfare state' (Busso 2017, 424). Largely deprived of their advocacy function, civil society 'gradually becomes less of a Gramscian field of confrontation and struggle for the construction of hegemony, and moves toward a Tocquevillian ideal-type, brought up to date through the use of concepts such as those of social cohesion and social capital' (Busso 2017, 440). Civil society is thus transformed in a way that 'blurs the boundary between the power and counter-power spheres, "taming" oppositions and removing conflicts' (Busso 2017, 441).

In short, the risk of social investment is to promote socially ameliorative reforms that fail to go beyond neoliberalism as they do not challenge its core elements, such as deep political inequalities; the extension of economic and market rationale to non-economic spheres (economization); and the technocratic and de-politicizing approach to social policy (Laruffa 2018, 2022a). By promoting social goals *within* neoliberalism, social investment can result in even stabilizing and legitimizing the latter.

The capability and human rights approach: toward a post-neoliberal social policy

Social investment aims to reduce social exclusion and improve living standards. Yet, it neglects democratization processes, which are essential for overcoming neoliberalism in social policy. What is needed is 'social empowerment', which aims to simultaneously improve people's quality of life and advance democratic power, promoting systemic and transformative change (Wright 2013). In this section we argue that an innovative conceptualization of a capability and human rights framework can help with theorizing and actualizing a post-neoliberal social policy.

A clear advantage of using the language of human rights is that it implies framing citizens – especially marginalized ones – as rights-holders. This rights-based discourse avoids that poor and excluded people are treated as 'victims' needing charity (as they are rights-holders) and/or that they feel ashamed of and responsible for their situation. The focus of responsibility for action is shifted from those whose rights are violated toward those who are violating the rights: governments (national/regional/local) and other institutions such as international organizations – the duty-bearers that have the obligation to fulfil human rights.

The discourse of human rights can thus empower marginalized communities and those in poverty to realize their entitlement to a better life, their legitimate claim on power, and their individual and collective power to change their situation (Hearne 2013; Hearne and Kenna 2014). Human rights frameworks make governing bodies accountable to right-holders, connecting human rights and democratization. As Stammers (2009) argues, movements that have struggled for human rights in the course of history have challenged arbitrary power and privilege, fighting for *democratizing* all forms of social relations.

Despite these advantages, human rights often remain a theoretical socio-legal construct, lacking implementation. Bringing the CA together with human rights (Burchardt and Vizard 2011; Sen 2005; Whiteside and Mah 2012) helps to shift the focus on *real*

rather than merely formal rights. This in turn allows to elaborate a post-neoliberal framework for social policy, which overcomes the three aforementioned limitations of social investment.

Firstly, the CA focuses social policy on wellbeing and justice rather than on economic variables, thereby abandoning the de-politicized and economized approach to welfare reform that informs social investment (Laruffa 2020). Secondly, the goal is not only to promote the capabilities of single individuals but also 'social empowerment' in Wright's sense. Indeed, the CA is concerned not only with people's living standards but also with their *political agency*: the 'public' is not seen merely as the 'patient', 'whose wellbeing commands attention' but also as the 'agent', 'whose actions can transform society' (Sen and Drèze 2002, 279). Applying this to social policy, we can conceptualize citizens not only as the beneficiaries of the welfare state but also as its coauthors (Olson 2006; Bonvin and Laruffa 2022). Capacitating welfare states, therefore, should not only guarantee a just distribution of resources and fostering social inclusion (e.g. empowering people for the labor market) but also make sure that citizens are given the real opportunity to participate in the co-construction of welfare states themselves (empowering citizens, both individually and collectively for social and political transformation). In this approach, democratic participation is valued not only because it allows citizens to defend their interests but also because it contributes to the formation of social values, political priorities and public knowledge (Anderson 2003; Bonvin, Laruffa, and Rosenstein 2018; Sen 1999, 2009). This 'constructive' function implies that the production of the knowledge relevant for formulating policies needs to be democratized (Bifulco 2017; Borghi 2018; Leonardis, Ota, and Salais 2012).

Thirdly, and as a consequence of the previous two, civil society organizations are considered (also) political actors rather than (only) service providers. The importance of the political-collective dimension of empowerment in the CA requires a politicized civil society and engaged citizenry: 'a vibrant associational life that enables the less privileged to develop their own distinctive preferences and priorities based on their shared economic positions and life circumstances, and to develop shared strategies for pursuing those preferences' (Evans 2002, 59). From this perspective, the CA implies a politicized conception of civil society, whereby marginalized groups are actively empowered within the welfare state to be included in the processes of policy design, public advocacy of their interests, and implementation with a view to promoting transformative change, tackling the structural sources of disadvantage (von Jacobi, Edmiston, and Ziegler 2017).

Participatory action research with civil society organizations and marginalized groups

This section presents the rights- and capability-based participatory methodology that we used in Re-InVEST. The project aimed at rethinking social investment, adopting as normative references the CA, human rights, and the value of social solidarity. The project uniquely involved a partnership of academics, civil society actors (trade unions and NGOs) and marginalized groups and citizens. We developed and implemented a participatory methodology that aimed to co-construct new knowledge on the impact of austerity and of the marketization of social policy – and on policies that could address these – through dialogue between these three groups of actors, enabling them to

participate in the public debate on European social policy (Hearne and Murphy 2019). In this methodology, academics do not act as 'experts' who hold objective knowledge, but as facilitators and educators, supporting marginalized groups and civil society organizations identifying key issues affecting them and researching with (rather than on) them. Civil society organizations are conceived not only as gatekeepers for recruiting participants for research, but as important holders of knowledge – and thus as research participants themselves – and as potential actors in societal transformation. Finally, marginalized people are not conceived as part of a social problem to be solved by the experts but as subjects of rights and agents of change who have valuable knowledge to share on their situation and on how to ameliorate it. Thus, in the project we drew on the 'merging of knowledge' approach – developed by the international movement ATD Fourth World – where the scientific knowledge of academics is put in dialogue with the experiential knowledge of people living in poverty and with the professional knowledge of those working with them. However, the goal was not to produce knowledge *per se*, but to generate knowledge that would be useful for social change and improving social policies. We thus also drew from Participatory Action Research (PAR) to bring the voice of marginalized groups into the democratic debate on social policy and to empower and mobilize them (Kemmis 2006; Reason and Bradbury 2008). Building on Freire's pedagogy (Freire 1970), PAR aims to deepen participatory methodologies, empowering people to challenge and liberate themselves from unjust social structures. PAR aims to produce knowledge *and* collective action for social change: the goal being not only to describe and analyze social problems but also to work collectively to solve them (Ledwith 2007). Hence, PAR has the ambition to constitute in itself an emancipatory process. Rather than being 'objects' of research, marginalized people are 'co-researchers', participating in all stages of the research process – starting already from the beginning, with the formulation of the research questions. Moreover, the final goal is to influence political action through the production of relevant knowledge, including the experiential knowledge of poverty and social exclusion. In this context, the focus is on addressing the root causes of oppression rather than its symptoms (Ledwith 2007).

Undoubtedly, citizens' participation in the formulation of policies may be used as an ideological instrument for reinforcing the legitimacy and acceptability of neoliberal hegemony, creating a de-politicized consensus that weakens and deflects conflicts (Moini 2011). Thus, certain forms of participation promoted by the state can be conceptualized as tokenistic, patronizing, and even manipulative (Arnstein 1969). This danger is entailed when participation remains formal, i.e. when participation is promoted without redistributing power. Yet, it is only through participation that marginalized actors can gain power: since those who have power normally want to hang onto it, historically it has had to be gained by the powerless through struggle rather than voluntarily offered by the powerful (Arnstein 1969). Hence, 'positive systemic change cannot be imposed from above but must be delivered by those who are currently living with inequality or disadvantage' (Hearne 2013, 139) – and by those committed to solidarity with the underprivileged. From this perspective, the democratization of knowledge production at the basis of PAR has the potential to foster the democratization of social politics and welfare state practice.

Hence, PAR is a methodology, which is fully consistent with both the normative and epistemological assumptions of the CA and human rights. Indeed, recognizing the

socially constructed nature of policy-relevant knowledge, PAR promotes (marginalized) citizens' 'voice' in the public sphere, thereby potentially contributing to the democratization of policymaking. PAR can promote capabilities and the *political agency* of marginalized social groups (Hearne and Murphy 2019; Walker 2018).

To expand on the relevance of PAR, we can build on Sen's studies on famines, which show that the latter are not the result of lack of economic growth or food availability but of political choices and that democratic societies do not face famines because democracy – through elections, free press and opportunities for public criticism – makes government accountable. In this context, Sen highlights that democracy and political participation not only enable vulnerable groups hit by famines to express their voice but also shape people's values and social priorities, enabling the construction of cross societal solidarity. As Sen (2009, 343) puts it:

> the proportion of the population affected, or even threatened, by a famine tends to be very small – typically much less than 10 per cent (often much less than that) and hardly ever more than that ratio. So if it were true that only disaffected famine victims vote against a ruling government when a famine rages or threatens, then the government could still be quite secure. What makes a famine such a political disaster for a ruling government is the reach of public reasoning, which moves and energizes a very large proportion of the general public to protest and shout about the 'uncaring' government and to try to bring it down.

From this perspective, the CA emphasizes the importance not only of the 'self-assertion of the underprivileged through political organization' but also of the enhancement of 'solidarity with the underprivileged on the part of other members of the society (. . .) who are often better placed to advance the cause of the disadvantaged by virtue of their own privilege' (Sen and Drèze 2002, 29).

We contend that PAR has the potential to promote at the same time vulnerable groups' self-assertion – through the promotion of their voice in the public sphere – as well as solidarity with these groups across society. In particular, we emphasize here the role of engaged academics as crucial allies with oppressed groups and civil society for promoting social solidarity. PAR can be an opportunity for 'recuperating the university as a potential counter-public sphere of critical discourse and epistemological inclusiveness', oriented to 'fostering critical reasoning for a functioning democracy' – a space in which we 'practise democracy as a form of political change and political agency' (Walker 2018, 54).

Against this background, PAR should promote effective forms of participation, i.e. those who involve a re-distribution of power. However, this ideal cannot always be realized and we found it challenging to achieve it in our project. This led us to conceptualize different levels of participant empowerment that can be achieved through PAR (Figure 1). At a minimum, PAR should enable participants to increase their awareness of the injustice of the situation in which they live (consciousness-raising). In this context, PAR can enable participants to learn 'democratic political subjectivity' and to 'name an injustice' – as a first step in challenging it (Walker 2018). Also, it should be possible to 'educate' participants, enhancing their awareness of their rights – including state's obligations under national law and international human rights treaties to address the particular problems they are facing. Indeed, we found that once citizens become aware they are rights-holders and can claim their rights to the state, they actively engage in becoming actors of social transformation.

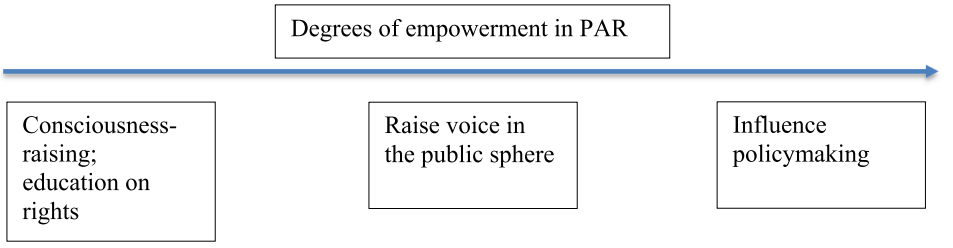

Figure 1. Varying levels of participants' political empowerment through participatory action research.

Building on this, at a higher degree of empowerment, there is a possibility to promote people's voice, nourishing their capacity to imagine and claim more emancipatory alternatives to the status quo. This includes participants raising their voice in the public sphere (e.g. organizing a public event). Finally, the highest level of political empowerment is achieved when PAR successfully promotes transformative policy-change.

Within RE-InVEST, we thus developed this methodology centered on the combination of human rights, the capability approach and participatory action research (Hearne and Murphy 2019). We then applied this framework between 2015 and 2019 in each of the 13 countries involved in the project, collaborating with 19 organizations (including universities, research centers and NGOs) and working with different 'vulnerable' and marginalized groups, such as people in mental health care (England), older job-seekers (Austria), people with health problems (Italy), young unemployed (Portugal), lone parents (Scotland), immigrants (Romania, France and Belgium), long-term unemployed (Germany), households in poverty (Netherlands), people with disabilities (Latvia) and marginalized young people (Switzerland).

Across the 13 country projects, RE-InVEST resulted in the co-construction of new knowledge- in the form of new important understandings of the social impacts of austerity, marketization and policy responses. The transformative participatory methods over multiple sessions enabled the co-construction of these insights. The focus on empowerment and participation of marginalized groups as equal co-researchers ensured that the research findings reflected their grounded realities while also enhancing their capacity to understand their own challenges in the wider policy context. Importantly for policy-orientated research, the participatory human rights framework also opened up a process of co-development of policy alternatives.

In the next section we discuss one of the most successful projects in RE-InVEST in empowering the participation of marginalized groups in both the creation of new knowledge and the co-construction of action in the public sphere. This case of homelessness in Ireland is a useful empirical illustration of how our theoretical and methodology framework can be used in practice – and how it may contribute to advancing toward a post-neoliberal social policy.

The case of homelessness

The social investment approach to homelessness – as adopted by the European Commission (EC 2013) – largely relies on an economic rationale for justifying policies aimed at preventing and reducing homelessness. While Leibetseder (2018, 79) is right in

arguing that this approach supports 'universal services and social rights', the overall framework remains largely informed by an economic rationale. Indeed, emphasis is put on the economic costs of homelessness and on the symmetric economic benefits of fighting homelessness (Laruffa 2021).

This confirms that social investment at least partially replaces the reference to normative values with the de-politicized and economized cost-benefit logic (Busso 2017). Hence, social investment possibly allows promoting social goals: it can potentially increase the living standards of homeless people, e.g. providing them with a stable accommodation. Yet, social investment prioritizes economic discourses of 'efficiency', 'investment' and 'returns' (e.g. reframing homelessness as a cost to be minimized), thereby marginalizing both the voice of homeless people and the language of 'human rights', 'dignity' and 'social justice' (Laruffa 2021). This economized and technocratic/de-politicized framework for policymaking downplays a political-democratic understanding of social policy. Indeed, conceiving homelessness as a 'waste of human capital' (EC 2013, 5) conceptualizes people as passive *objects* of policy interventions rather than democratic citizens and political actors who should have a voice in policymaking.

Crucially, reframing social policies as economic investment has concrete consequences for actually implemented social interventions. The fact that reducing homelessness can be viewed as an economic investment allows involving financial actors in funding initiatives aimed at reducing/preventing homelessness, facilitating the commodification of social policy. For example, in London a 'homelessness social impact bond' has been developed, which allows private financial capital to invest in interventions aimed at reducing homelessness, earning a profit on this investment (Cooper, Graham, and Himick 2016). Here, the 'generosity' of social policy is not the main problem, since the economic logic behind social impact bonds may be compatible with the effective reduction of homelessness. Thus, the immediate provision of housing – the 'most economically efficient' policy for managing homelessness – seems to 'unexpectedly' benefit 'an abandoned and usually despised and degraded population' (Willse 2010, 172). However, these investments in the provision of housing should not be mistaken for a reversal of abandonment: they 'can accompany social and political abandonment' as social problems 'become productive sites for neo-liberal economic expansion' (Willse 2010, 158).

Transforming homelessness into a business opportunity, Social Impact Bonds (SIBs) allow financial capital to earn a profit on the most vulnerable members of society, thereby promoting new market-based and utilitarian ways of seeing and thinking about homelessness. In this way, SIBs also have implications for civil society organizations working with homeless people, transforming the 'ethos', mentalities and practices of the actors involved (including social workers) toward more utilitarian values. Evaluating the homelessness SIB in London, Cooper, Graham, and Himick (2016) show how it pushes the charity providing services to homeless people to adopt a more entrepreneurial attitude, focused on maximizing cost-efficiency, including through salary cuts, increase in working-time and layoffs. Moreover, the SIB uses accounting methods that – with their extreme rationality and quantification together with the application of the economic grid to homelessness – seem to efface the concern for humanity and dignity. Finally, with SIBs, civil society organizations are mainly interpreted as de-politicized, low-cost service

providers, which reduces civil society organizations' critical public advocacy and transformative roles, marginalizing conflict and encouraging cooperation between civil society and the financial sector.

Hence, while it is difficult to question a policy, which is presented as being able to generate a 'win-win' situation for everybody, from the financial investor to the homeless person, the risk is to undermine transformative and long-term solutions to social problems. In particular, social investment marginalizes redistribution as a policy solution – since this would be against the 'win-win' logic. Thus, this social policy agenda focuses on reconciling social and economic goals, obscuring potential *systematic* tensions between them, and especially the fact that the economic system may structurally generate social problems. Social investment privileges an approach that transforms homelessness into an investment opportunity for attracting the resources needed for 'confronting homelessness'. Resolving social problems must become appealing from the economic viewpoint in order to attract financial investors, which will earn a profit on their investments in SIBs. Social investment thus does not try to address the root causes of homelessness that have their origins in the economic system, where housing is central in wealth accumulation and a crucial element of financialised capitalism. The solution envisaged in social investment is rather that of encouraging financial actors – those often responsible of housing exclusion – to invest in the solution of the symptoms through SIBs. In this way, however, the economic elites can earn a profit investing in the solutions to problems that they have contributed to create (Kish and Leroy 2015, 646), for example through speculation in the housing market. Finally, involving for-profit providers in homeless services raises concerns for standards and quality of support for homeless people and entails the risk of paradoxically encouraging the continuation of homelessness, as the latter becomes source of profits (Hearne 2020).

Applying the capability and human rights framework: the case of Ireland

In contrast to social investment, in the capability and human rights framework, homelessness is conceptualized as a violation of fundamental human rights, which undermines human dignity and needs to be addressed as a matter of social justice rather than as a response to economic benefits of addressing it. In this context, rather than as investment *objects*, homeless people are conceived as *subjects* of rights and as *political beings* – which makes it necessary to prioritize their 'voice' within social policy.

Within the Re-InVEST project, the Irish research team from Maynooth University worked with an NGO, Focus Ireland, to engage individuals and families who were homeless in assessing the impact of the marketization of social housing policy on homelessness (Hearne and Murphy 2019). The aim was to develop a new politics of knowledge on homelessness, articulating a critical and emancipatory perspective (Farrugia and Gerrard 2016) through the application of the rights and capability-oriented PAR outlined in the previous sections. The first phase of the research process involved trust building with the homeless families as well as collecting the experiences of their current situation. Through group discussion, drawings and other interactive methods undertaken with the families in their emergency accommodation, the team identified the key issues of common concerns (co-constructed knowledge). This phase also included an empowering educational process based on the right to housing.

In the subsequent phases of the research process the goal was to develop co-constructed policy solutions centered on the 'right to housing'. Ireland has a market-oriented model for responding to (the risk of) homelessness, whereby the state pays a subsidy to private landlords to house low-income tenants who qualify for social housing, and provides emergency accommodation (Family Hubs, hostels, hotel rooms, B&Bs; mainly privately provided) for those made homeless. The co-constructed research process however identified new critical perspectives on this policy: the homeless families identified unique insights regarding the negative consequences of the marketization of homelessness policy. Firstly, Irish housing policymakers claimed that new forms of emergency accommodation they were developing (called 'family hubs') were an improvement on B&B and hotel type emergency accommodation. However, the families through the PAR process, communicated a number of negative aspects of Family Hubs, such as impacts on their parenting, children's sense of fear, restrictive visiting hours, and an overall sense of these being like a 'prison'. This unique insight challenged the dominant policy discourse of Family Hubs being a positive development in homelessness policy in Ireland. Secondly, policymakers were critical of families turning down offers of private rental housing (using the state social housing subsidy), and waiting in emergency accommodation for permanent council housing. The PAR process revealed that the family's rationale for this was a fear of the insecurity of the private rental sector and of putting their children through homelessness again. It revealed the negative impacts of the marketization of social policy responses to homelessness (discrimination, eviction) as a reason for waiting and seeking traditional, permanent housing. Moreover, it showed that the solution to the 'problem' of homelessness requires conceptualizing housing as a social right to be provided on the basis of need through a non-market, de-commodified approach. Thus, the research also co-constructed rights-based and de-commodified policy proposals, whereby the state (or the local authority) directly provides housing to homeless people and ensures greater tenant security in private rental housing.

The key 'action' of the PAR process was empowering the homeless families to bring their voice into the policy and public sphere through a dialogue between the homeless people and different policy and political stakeholders, including senior local authority officials and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC). During the dialogue, the homeless parents (mainly lone parent mothers) clearly articulated their experiences in terms of the impact of policies on their wellbeing and rights, showing the research process provided them with a language and insight on housing policy and on the human right to housing. Following the dialogue, the research team produced a public policy document and IHREC published a report with the co-constructed policy proposals. These publications were cited in national media, the report was discussed in the national parliament and members of the research team were invited to present its findings in the parliamentary committee on housing. The research results were also discussed at various seminars and conferences organized by NGOs, some of which included peer researchers and homeless families attending and presenting. This research contributed to and influenced the public and policy debate and knowledge on homelessness and social housing policy in Ireland. The research findings have been referred to in national media, parliamentary debates and policy and practice by political representatives, NGOs and civil society campaigns. The research contributed to a tentative policy shift in 2020 which committed to move away, over time, from the marketized provision

of social housing subsidies, and instead to a greater emphasis on the direct delivery of social housing by the Irish state.

Neoliberalism, social investment and the capability approach

Comparing the social investment and the capability approaches to homelessness allows us to better specify the relationship between neoliberalism, social investment and the CA. At a first glance, it seems that the main differences between social investment and the CA lie in the policy processes and justification logics, whereas the policy outcomes are similar. Thus, while social investment emphasizes the economic benefits of reducing homelessness, thereby adopting a rather technocratic/de-politicized policy approach, the capability framework focuses on homeless people's rights and implies a democratic-political policymaking process that involves homeless people themselves (conceiving them as coauthors rather than only as beneficiaries of policies). Instead, at the level of policy outcomes, it seems that policies for contrasting homelessness can be justified using indifferently the economic rationale aimed at reducing the costs of homelessness and the rights-based logic concerned with social justice (see Laruffa 2021). This resonates with the argument that the main difference between the CA and neoliberalism is that while the former treats human beings as the final ends of public action, the latter conceives them as means for enhancing efficiency and economic growth – and that in many cases this difference is at the level of logics and normative justification rather than at the level of policies. For example, as Jolly (2003) notes, it is possible to oppose discrimination with reference to social justice and human rights but also as a matter of efficiency. While the CA would mainly focus on reasons of equity, neoliberals may be more concerned with economic justifications but the outcome may be the same: the establishment of anti-discrimination laws. Similar arguments can be made for policies promoting human health: while the CA would treat health as intrinsically valuable and a matter of human right, neoliberals would emphasize the beneficial consequences of investing in people's health for the economy – as a matter of human capital investments (Jolly 2003).

Yet, it is important to highlight that there are cases in which the kind of justification for policies contributes to the type of policies adopted. For example, framing education as an investment in people's human capital may marginalize an understanding of education as a contribution to people's autonomy and democratic agency (Bonvin and Francesco 2019; Laruffa 2020). Similarly, as discussed for the case of homelessness, adopting the investment logic is not neutral, e.g. the implementation of social impact bonds has concrete consequences for civil society organizations working with homeless people while redistributive policies are marginalized.

In this context, our argument is not that social investment is necessarily neoliberal or that social investment and the CA are mutually exclusive. Rather, the main conclusion that emerges from the discussion of the case of homelessness is that in order for social investment to constitute a post-neoliberal and capability-oriented framework for social policy, the understanding of investment cannot be (entirely) economic: what is required is a political-democratic conceptualization of investment, whereby societies are empowered to collectively decide where to invest and for what purpose – and all citizens (including marginalized ones) have the opportunity to participate in this democratic process of establishing social priorities. If investment would be interpreted in political-

democratic terms, social investment could provide a post-neoliberal framework for social policy because it would take the need for democratization into account. That said, we believe that the CA is more compatible with the language of rights – as promoted e.g. by the 'European Pillar of Social Rights' (EC 2017) – than with a discourse centered on investments.

Finally, this discussion also helps to specify the conditions under which the CA can constitute a valuable framework for formulating progressive social policy. Indeed, critical scholars within social policy have raised some concerns about the CA (Carpenter 2009; Dean 2009). Showing how the CA can be used for developing a post-neoliberal approach, this paper thus contributes to address these concerns. In this context, our central argument is that, in order for the CA to function as a framework for emancipatory social policy, 'capabilities' should be interpreted in a way that assigns a central place to social-collective empowerment rather than in individualistic terms.

Conclusion

This paper aimed at developing a post-neoliberal framework for social policy and welfare reform. In this context, we made three interconnected contributions. First, we provided a critique of social investment, which is often seen as an alternative to neoliberalism in the social policy literature. While advancing social justice with respect to austerity through the improvement of the 'quantitative' dimension of social policy, social investment ultimately fails to provide a post-neoliberal framework for social policy because it overlooks the 'qualitative' dimension of welfare reform and especially the need for democratization. Indeed, social investment adopts a rather technocratic and de-politicized approach to welfare reform that does not challenge power inequalities and extends economic and market logics to non-economic areas replacing values-based reasoning in social policy; it frames empowerment in individualistic and utilitarian-economic terms, overlooking its collective and political dimensions; and tends to promote a de-politicized understanding of civil society, whereby civil society organizations are conceived as partners and low-cost service providers rather than as political actors with advocacy and solidarity functions.

Second, we proposed a post-neoliberal framework for social policy grounded on the CA and human rights. While the CA is often reductively used for legitimizing policies focused on the promotion of employment and individuals' inclusion in society, we have argued that, taking a more complex conceptualization and combining it with human rights approaches allows the formulation of proposals that aim not only at the amelioration of individuals' quality of life but also at the democratization of power across society. Indeed, we make the case that in order to effectively address social, economic and political inequalities, the democratization (empowered participation of marginalized groups) of the welfare state is essential.

Third, the paper showed a potential pathway to promote this post-neoliberal capability and rights-based social policy building on the results of the RE-InVEST project. Drawing on such results (and in particular the case study of homelessness), we showed the potential for theorizing and implementing an approach, which puts the empowerment of vulnerable people at the center of the policy process, through the collaboration between academics acting as 'public scholars', civil society organizations and vulnerable people themselves.

Indeed, the main limit of a top-down social policy approach – however progressive – is that it does not challenge power asymmetries and does not include the particular experiential knowledge of marginalized citizens. From this perspective, formulating progressive social policy proposals that improve people's wellbeing or 'social inclusion' is insufficient: citizens' political empowerment for democratization and the redistribution of power are also necessary elements a post-neoliberal framework for social policy. This requires involving the marginalized and affected citizens in the development of policy proposals, in advocacy in the public sphere, and in the implementation and evaluation of welfare policies. In this context, one critical difference between social investment and the capability and human rights framework is that in the latter the value of social solidarity plays a crucial role – and we argued that PAR can be used as an instrument for promoting it – whereas in the former the reference to solidarity seems superfluous, as policies for vulnerable populations can be justified using the economic logic alone (e.g. promoting policies for reducing and preventing homelessness can be justified in terms of savings and financial actors may have an economic interest in promoting these policies since, through SIBs, they can gain a profit on them). Crucially, while in the RE-InVEST project we worked with 'marginalized' and 'vulnerable' populations, in order to move to a post-neoliberal social policy, it is essential to build broader alliances with other groups and movements, including the labor movement, the ecological movement and the feminist movement – and with the civil society organizations close to these movements. Indeed, the central pillar of the post-neoliberal social policy is the democratization of the welfare state, which should become accountable to *all* citizens. Table 1 summarizes the main differences between the capability and rights approach and social investment.

Table 1. Summary of the main differences between the social investment and the capability and human rights approaches to welfare reform.

	Social Investment Approach	Capability- and Human Rights-Approach
Central aims	Enhance economic efficiency (i.e. reduce the costs of social problems and empower individuals for the labor market) and improve the living conditions of individuals, mainly conceived as private-economic actors.	Advance justice and 'social empowerment': the goal is not only to improve people's wellbeing in the current system but also to reform the latter, deepening democracy.
Mode of governance and approach to welfare reform	Economized (i.e. centered on the extension of the economic logic to non-economic domains, replacing value-based reasoning) and adaptive (i.e. centered on mitigating the symptoms of social problems): de-politicizes power asymmetries.	Values-based, political-democratic and transformative (i.e. centered on addressing the root-causes of social problems): challenges power asymmetries.
Role of citizens	Passive objects of investment interventions.	Political actors, subjects of rights and co-producers.
Role of social scientists	Experts who formulate welfare reform proposals on the basis of 'scientific evidence', e.g. calculating the costs and benefits of social policies.	'Public scholars' who, engaging with civil society and citizens (including disadvantaged ones) through PAR, promote democratization and solidarity, reinforcing (marginalized) citizens' 'voice' in the public sphere.
Role of civil society organizations	Innovative and low-cost service providers.	Political actors with advocacy functions engaged in processes of democratization.
Role of solidarity	Superfluous	Essential and linked with processes of democratization.

Clearly, given the small population involved in RE-InVEST, the 'impact' was limited in scale and scope. Thus, the main challenge remains to find ways of institutionalizing the democratization of the welfare state over the long term. While we do not have a complete answer to this, we do think that RE-InVEST shows the potential of alternative approaches and practices that could bring us toward a post-neoliberal empowering welfare states, particularly concerning the collaboration between academics, civil society and vulnerable groups in processes aimed at transforming the welfare state.

This approach too faces some limitations. Above all it presents a fundamental challenge to the dominant social policy paradigm, institutions and practices – including academic research – which exclude the active participation of affected/marginalized groups. Indeed, there are very real practical challenges of engaging marginalized groups in active participation in policy and research. PAR approaches are very demanding in terms of the time, energy and resources required from academics, workers of civil society organizations and vulnerable people. Openly being 'engaged', 'critical' and 'political' can also raise challenges for obtaining funding. These difficulties are faced by both civil society organizations – that depend on state's funding and/or service provision for their functioning – and academics, who suffer from increasingly precarious project-based working conditions and competition pressures as well as from market-oriented logics in the university and research funding sources.

Finally, the risk of a framework explicitly oriented toward the realization of social justice and democratization and co-constructed with marginalized populations is that it may ultimately fail to influence concrete policy choices. The importance accorded to value-based reasoning and the crucial role played by social solidarity makes this approach ambitious and difficult to realize whereas, paradoxically, the discourse of social investment has the potential to effectively convince the economic and financial elites to 'invest' in social policy (even if only for the sake of obtaining economic advantages), thereby actually contributing to ameliorate the living conditions, for example, of homeless people. In other words, while the economic argument for social policy may be heard by elites, arguments referring to social justice and human rights – however compelling – may be simply ignored.

All these difficulties are complementary and connected. What they actually show is the extent to which different areas of social life – from the university to civil society organizations and democratic politics – are currently deeply shaped by neoliberal hegemony. At the same time, this insight also illuminates how essential it is to look for synergies and collaborations among different actors for promoting transformative change toward a post-neoliberal social policy.

Note

1. Crucially, what follows is the result of our personal reflections and does not necessarily represent the positions of all members of the project, which have always been heterogeneous.

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