The Sustainable Development Goals, Capabilities and the Societal Impact of the Humanities

Eiríkur Smári Sigurðarson¹

¹esmari@hi.is
University of Iceland, School of Humanities, Sæmundargötu 2, 101 Reykjavík, Iceland
Introduction

Researchers and research institutes are increasingly required to demonstrate the value of their research to society or, to put it differently, the beneficial societal impact of their activities. Recently the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) have been used to measure the societal impact of research (e.g. in the new “University Impact Rankings” published by the Times Higher Education in 2019) and to guide research programmes towards socially valuable goals (e.g. in the current and developing EU Framework Programmes, “H2020” and “Horizon Europe”). The SDGs give one possible answer to the question of what research activities should aim for and have been enthusiastically adopted as such in some quarters. There is a risk that this trend will develop into new counting exercises with requirements of researchers and institutes to show how much they are doing to support and further the SDGs, including researchers in the humanities. While it will no doubt be possible to map research in the humanities onto many of the seventeen SDGs it is a more difficult task to understand and show how the research makes this contribution and what the actual contribution is.

Theoretical background

This paper will address this problematic issue through the lens of the capability approach. Firstly, it is based on the capability approach as it has been developed and presented by Martha Nussbaum (2000 and 2011) with her emphasis on adopting a list of ten “central human functional capabilities” for evaluation purposes. Secondly, it is based on a modular version of the capability approach as it has more recently been developed by Ingrid Robeyns (2005, 2016 and 2017). The capability approach is based on a fundamental distinction between capabilities and functionings, where a capability is the real freedom an individual has to function in a way he or she values, while a functioning is to do or to be something. The main emphasis within the approach is on capabilities, as people should not (except in exceptional circumstances) be forced to function against their own values and / or choices, even though someone else might find it desirable. It can be argued that the SDGs are a version of doing or being, in the sense of the capability approach. Following that, an argument can also be made for the need to emphasise capabilities, more than functionings, in individuals and societies to further the SDGs (but this would also apply to goals other than the SDGs). This is the exploratory approach taken in this paper. The value of Robeyns’ approach is not least in her emphasis on social factors that influence the development of capabilities and the realisation of capabilities through functionings.

Methods and aims

The paper builds on two initial attempts to analyse cases of societal impact using the capability approach. The first was an attempt based on cases of humanities research collected within the European research network ENRESSH (Muhonen, Benneworth, and Olmos-Peñuela 2018), that were analysed using Nussbaum’s list of ten central capabilities (Sigurdarson 2018a and 2018b). The second is an analysis of ten cases of research in the humanities collected through interviews within the University of Iceland. The cases were analysed based on Nussbaum’s list and also on Robeyns’ modular approach (Haraldsdottir and Sigurdarson 2019). The current paper develops these previous versions and proposes steps towards a developed capability theory of societal impact of research that is more suited
to the humanities than many other attempts. If successful, this theory can contribute towards developments of new ways of narrating research in the humanities with potential benefits for evaluations of societal impact.

Acknowledgements

This research is developed within the ENRESSH Cost Action (enressh.eu) and the University of Iceland funded project “A virtue model for societal impact”.

References


Sigurdarson, E.S. (2018a) “Capabilities, epistemic justice and the impact of humanities”. Presentation at a research seminar at INGENIO, Valencia, 8 February 2018.

This sustainable development goal focuses on developing and expanding renewable energy resources such as sun, wind, hydropower, liquid and solid biofuels, biogas and geothermal. These renewable sources of energy don’t emit greenhouse gasses to the atmosphere and therefore are ideal for the environment and human health.

7. Achieving Gender Equality. To make sustainable development the norm, we have to change the vision of the cultures of each country. To change the vision of the culture two things have to occur. The culture must value a global benefit more than a local one. Unsustainable development and overconsumption practices greatly impact biodiversity. The life ecosystem is designed in such a way that species depend on one another for survival.

Sustainable development (SD) has become a fundamental strategy to guide the world’s social and economic transformation. However, in the process of practice, there are still misinterpretations in regards to the theory of SD. Such misinterpretations are highlighted in the struggle between strong and weak sustainable development paths, and the confusion of the concept of intra-generational and inter-generational justice. In this paper, the literature survey method, induction method, and normative analysis were adopted to clarify the gradual evolution and improvement process of the concept and obj

The Sustainable Development Goals are the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. They address the global challenges we face, including poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace and justice. Learn more and take action. Watch the global broadcast “Nations United.” On the 75th anniversary of the United Nations and the 5th anniversary of the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals “in the midst of a pandemic radically transforming our economies and societies” this 30-minute film tells the story of the world as it is, as it was, and as The Sustainable Development Goals, also known as the Global Goals, are a call from the United Nations to all countries around the world to address the great challenges that humanity faces and to ensure that all people have the same opportunities to live a better life without compromising our planet.

Sustainable development goals explained in 2 minutes. Human-kind faces many challenges to ensure that all people have the same development and well-being opportunities. One of the major recent achievements in sustainability has been the adoption of Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals.