

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

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## 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.

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