Stoecklin, D. and Bonvin, J-M. (eds.)
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The capability approach offers ‘a new way of grasping children's rights’ (p. 2) and making sense of ‘the gap between formal liberties (rights) and real freedom (capability)’ (p. 12), so argue Stoecklin and Bonvin in their introduction to an eclectic collection of chapters exploring how children's formal rights are converted into everyday capabilities (and the reverse). At the heart of the capability approach, famously constructed by the Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen, is the notion that people should have real freedom to live the life they value.

Children are people and they have their own international human rights treaty which propounds the importance of dignity and freedom (at least in its preamble). Whilst not decrying the importance of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Stoecklin and Bonvin bemoan the absence of a “call for a Copernican revolution” in children’s rights, which could approximate Sen's impact on economics (p.146). The capabilities approach, they believe, offers a 'very useful' framework for analysing how normative rights affect ‘children's lived experience’ (p. 131). Their own chapter focuses on children's right to be heard (Article 12) and leisure. They offer a compelling critique of adult-centric frameworks used to assess participation, which includes the ladder metaphor and project-based indicators, and show how an approach focused on the child's lived experience (in this instance, using Stoecklin's “kaleidoscope of experience”) elicits rich information about what children actually value in their lives. Relying on the work of Foucault, the function of participation in integrating and socialising children, as an alternative to punishment, is explored. Empowerment is experienced when children are able to roam around, mess about and do nothing, they conclude (p. 150). A similar challenge is offered in a chapter on children's capabilities as agency, where Baraldi and Iervese explain:

> children can be heard and can express their rights by asking for more time to play or for less homework but the real difference regarding their rights is their possibility to decide rules and time for play and homework (p. 49).

This same chapter interrogates inter-personal relationships, showing how the traditional sequence of teacher asking a question, the child answering and the teacher evaluating (giving feedback) ‘restricts the opportunities of conversion
from children’s resources to children’s capabilities’ (p. 52). Adults maintain their superior positioning, in other words. Moving to a facilitative response, whereby teachers show interest in students’ views and observations but do not ‘correct’ or appraise them, upgrades children’s capabilities (p. 61). There are lessons here for adults in all settings, not only schools.

A chapter reporting the findings of research with 16 children who had undergone care assessments revealed that those who had instigated ‘their own protection’ by seeking formal help felt more in control. One child ‘felt like a suitcase’ (p. 205). The abiding message is that the child’s subjectivity and agency must be understood and validated, no matter how they arrived in care. But valuing children’s own strategies can present complex challenges for the ‘saviours’ (p. 243), as Hanson, Poretti and Darbellay show in their chapter on “living rights”, which ‘are alive, through active and creative interpretations, associations and framing of what constitutes in a given context a child right – in people’s hearts and minds’ (p. 243). The agency exercised by children in living in perilous conditions – extreme poverty, sexual exploitation, witchcraft and war among them – is presented as proof that children’s rights have a lot to learn from the capability approach (and social constructionism). Those relying on the CRC represent dominant moral standards formulated ‘top down’ (p. 244) whereas the capability approach demands dialogue and that children be heard. This thought-provoking chapter overlooks the reality that NGOs and others working with children themselves interpret and apply the CRC in response to the individual child sat in front of them. They also have hearts and minds. Too little analysis is given to the life-changing effect that can come from communicating to children: ‘You do not have to live like this’.

Early in the book, we are reminded that children were not involved in drafting the CRC (has any treaty, besides the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, been influenced directly by ordinary people?). We are told that most of the CRC’s articles ‘see children as passive actors ... which is typical of the classic human rights approach’ (p. 22) whereas individual agency and self-determination are at the heart of the capability approach. As someone who has for quarter of a century used the CRC as an advocacy tool with power holders, as well as to communicate solidarity with children, this put me in the realm of defensive reader. I have seen children’s eyes shine and their shoulders elevate on hearing they have equal worth to adults and there is a United Nations treaty to prove it. But there is a great deal to commend in this book, from its magnification of children’s lived lives already highlighted above, to wider political discussions encompassing individualism versus social solidarity, to the existence of frailty and interdependence among all human beings (not only the young ones), to the responsibilities of parents vis-à-vis the state. Reynaert