
Aspirations and human development interventions

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Abstract

What role can aspirations play in small-scale human development interventions? In this paper, we contribute to answering that question with both conceptual and empirical work. Aspirations can play at least two roles in small-scale human development interventions: the capabilities-selecting role and the agency-unlocking role. While aspirations also face the challenge of adaptation to adverse circumstances and unjust social structures, we argue that this challenge can be met by embedding the formulation and expression of aspirations within a setting of public discussion and awareness-raising activities, and that adaptation can be further countered by including a commitment to action. We then report on field research done in Khayelitsha, a township in Cape Town, South Africa, where a group of women went through a process of voicing, examining, and then realizing their aspirations. The action research confirms our theoretical hypotheses. We also do not find any evidence of adaptation of the women's aspirations, and argue that the absence of such adaptation might be a result of active capability selection, reflection, deliberation, and the exercise of agency throughout the action research programme.

Introduction

Among development scholars and development think-tanks there is an increasing awareness that low aspirations may in some contexts constitute part of what poverty is, and hence that working on aspirations of the poor can play an important role in an anti-poverty strategy (for example, Ray, 2003; Appadurai, 2004; Bernard *et al.*, 2008; Ibrahim, 2011).¹ In this paper we aim to contribute to that emerging literature from within the human development paradigm. More specifically, we aim at advancing our understanding of small-scale human development interventions (i.e. development interventions focused on capability enhancement at the grass-roots level in a limited context), by analysing to what extent aspirations can be a useful tool in the practice of human development interventions. Our analysis is in part built on conceptual work and the development of theoretical hypotheses, and in part on empirical work in Khayelitsha, a township in Cape Town, South Africa.²

We will proceed as follows. In the next section we discuss the concepts that we will use. In the third section we theorize the role aspirations can play in human development interventions, and also pay attention to the problem of

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