

Work and Employment in the Capability Approach

Thematic Issue
31st March 2025

Editors:

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Description of Theme:

Work, both paid and unpaid, is critical to human development and wellbeing. Individual advantages and disadvantage, gender inequality, economic inequalities within and between countries, and the transgression of ecological earth system boundaries all are to a large extent the result of the way societies organise work. Today, work has received widespread attention in light of transformative changes in modern labour markets – spurred on by the development of new technologies such as AI-driven automation and platform labour (e.g. see Gandini, 2019; Ghirlanda, 2024; Rogers, 2016; Spencer, 2024); more market-mediated and precarious forms of employment relationship (e.g. see Kalleberg, 2009); and the modern preponderance of worklessness, under-employment and job insecurity as a result of the end of full employment since the 1980s (Beatty et al., 2000; Beck, 2018; Blanchflower, 2019; Burchell et al., 2002; Schokkaert and Van Ootegem, 1990).

In the Global North, these changes have potentially serious implications for the sustainability of welfare systems, given that a key source of their funding has come from the taxation of and contributions from paid work – traditionally full-time, secure and standard employment relationships, done largely by men (Morel and Palme, 2013). In the Global South, the continued predominance of low-quality employment, informal forms of work and subsistence work hinder the development of such welfare systems in the first place (OECD, 2023). In the global economy, value and supply chains connect labour processes across geographical regions and societies. In all contexts, the interaction of employment with unpaid social care and reproduction work perpetuates gender inequality. The failure to develop ecologically sustainable forms of work is also undermining the world's progress in meeting its urgent climate change commitments (Zimmermann and Engelbrecht, 2024); and the limited availability of meaningful work, and workers' inability to exercise genuine voice in the workplace, has been argued to have played a role in the decline of trust in democratic institutions and the growth of populist politics (Yeoman, 2014).

Over recent decades, research applying the Capability Approach (CA) has made a significant contribution to understanding workers' wellbeing. Work has always been a feature of applications of the CA, receiving some treatment in both Sen's (e.g. Sen, 2000) and Nussbaum's (e.g. Nussbaum, 2019) writings, but the 21st Century has seen the proliferation of applications to work. These span every area of the topic –ranging from job quality (Green, 2009; Green et al., 2022; Sehnbruch, 2004; Soffia, 2018; Stephens, 2023a, 2025) to meaningful work (Weidel, 2018; Yeoman, 2013); worker voice (Bonvin, 2012; De Leonardis et al., 2012; Regier, 2024); worklessness (Bartelheimer et al., 2012; Schokkaert and Van Ootegem, 1990); work, training and active labour market policy (Fernandez-Urbano and Orton, 2021; Lambert et al., 2012; Lambert and Vero, 2013; Laruffa, 2020); studies of new technologies such as automation, AI and platform labour (Ghirlanda, 2024; IFOW, 2025; Meier, 2024); investigations into work-family and family-work conflict (Hobson, 2011; Hobson and Zimmermann, 2022); labour law (Bueno, 2022; Deakin, 2019); environmental sustainability in work (Zimmermann and Engelbrecht, 2024); and more foundational debates about whether work is intrinsically or instrumentally important to the achievement of functionings and capabilities (Bartelheimer et al., 2024; Stephens, 2023b). They exist within all disciplines of the social sciences from industrial sociology to economics and philosophy, and encompass everything from conceptual research (e.g. see Suppa, 2019) to more empirical applications (e.g. see Green, 2025).

However, there is currently a disparate range of applications of the CA to work, with a fragmentation of perspectives across different sub-disciplines and areas of study. This owes itself partly to both the inherently under-specified nature of the CA (see Robeyns, 2017) and the inter-disciplinary nature of the study of work – with many applications existing in disciplinary silos with insufficient engagement between different perspectives. Nevertheless, it should be possible, first, to seek common ground on questions that are specific to applying the CA in the field of work, such as Functionings of ultimate value to include in the Capability space, distinctive resources, Conversion Factors and areas of agency; and, second, to identify through this process the key areas of continuing debate, to inform future research. It is also important to engage with other normative theories that apply to work, and to take stock of which of these are applied in the CA, and how. This need has become increasingly urgent given the marked changes in the experience of work described above.

The Work and Employment Thematic Group of the HDCA was set up in 2019 with the purpose of promoting and supporting the research of scholars, students and practitioners using the CA in the field of paid and unpaid work, in labour markets and employment, both in the context of the HDCA and beyond. In this Special Issue of the *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities on Work and Employment in the Capability Approach*, the Coordinators of this Thematic Group hope to provide a means for all scholars engaged in research on work and the CA to come together to discuss the role of work in human development and wellbeing. We invite applications on all areas of work which seek to get to grips with the challenges work poses; study their effect on workers' wellbeing and human development; and investigate the implications this poses for modern welfare states, politics, and society as a whole.

As part of this Special Issue, editors will work on a structured bibliography of publications which have applied the CA to work and employment, and will include a rendering of this stock-taking exercise in their introduction. In addition, authors of abstracts approved for submission to the Journal will be invited to also present early versions of their papers at an “open panel” of the HDCA conference in Bradford, UK, on 1st-5th September 2025 should they so wish (subject to their signing-up to attend the conference).

Topics for Authors:

We particularly welcome papers which reflect on the Capability Approach: considering which features of the approach are most useful for their applications, and what the CA can bring to existing labour studies. Papers should include reflections (including critical ones) on how authors use core concepts such as of Functionings and Capabilities, Conversion Factors and the Capability Set in their research. We invite both philosophical and empirical (quantitative or qualitative); and with any level or geographic focus (sub-national, national, international) or none. We especially encourage papers applying the CA in under-studied contexts such as the Global South, and/or exploring under-studied populations.

Beyond this, we intentionally do not prescribe topics for paper proposals. Members and non-members of the HDCA, and both scholars and practitioners, are welcome. So too are authors who are not engaged in the CA but who nonetheless have observations or reflections about its use and applicability in the field of work and employment. However, all papers, including empirical papers, should make a contribution to the use of core concepts of the CA in the study of work and employment. Therefore, the presentation of data and empirical findings should be accompanied by such conceptual reflections.

We define work as both unpaid and unpaid productive activity (see Budd, 2011; Cooke et al., 2013) – including formal and informal forms of employment relationship, or subsistence work. Papers should show an awareness that work is both paid and unpaid, and takes many forms in different global contexts – conversant with issues such as the implications of unpaid care for workers' wellbeing and gender inequality; and the role of global supply chains in entrenching inequalities in work between countries. Whilst it is not necessary for each paper to focus on *both* paid *and* unpaid work, or to span *both* the Global North *and* the Global South, we intend for the Special Issue as a whole to give treatment to all of these issues.

To invite thought, issues that TG members are currently working on include, but are not limited to: investigating whether work is an intrinsic aspect of wellbeing (as a Functioning in itself) or instrumental to the achievement of wellbeing (enhancing/impeding the achievement of other Functionings); identifying/measuring the importance of the various Functionings enabled or impeded by jobs; the ‘sustainability’ of jobs (both environmental, but also in terms of employment security); measuring the ‘Capability Set for work’ (i.e. work-related capabilities achievable through jobs); the skills and capabilities expected of women in the workplace, as well as social norms and caregiving demands that limit women's choices in the labour market;

participatory research into health and sustainability at work; "sustainable leadership" tools for enterprises; comparative research into the nature of labour markets in the Global North and Global South; and studies into the wellbeing of young people who are unemployed after higher education.

Process and timeline:

The timeline for submitting abstracts and papers is as follows:

31st March 2025: Call for papers goes out. Potential contributors will be asked to specify whether they would be interested in presenting their papers at a Thematic Panel in the HDCA Conference in Bradford on 1st-5th September.

31st May 2025: Deadline for submission of abstracts.

15th June 2025: Authors who submitted abstracts notified and invited to submit full papers. Those interested in presenting at the HDCA Conference will be informed of arrangements and asked whether they would like to present online or in-person.

1st-5th September 2025: Some of the invited papers will be presented as draft papers in a Thematic Panel in HDCA Conference, as part of an 'open panel', to help inform paper development.

15th January 2026: Deadline for the submission of full papers.

31st May 2026: First review reports completed.

15th August 2026: First revisions completed.

30th September 2026: Second review reports completed.

30th November 2026: Final papers completed.

1st December 2026: Editors' introduction completed.

February 2027: Publication of the Special Issue.

Submission procedure:

Please first submit an abstract of 500 words to all three Editors (t.c.stephens@lse.ac.uk; nsuppa@ub.edu; p.bartelheimer@t-online.de) no later than **31st May 2025**. Proposals should include the author name(s), affiliation(s) and a contact email address, and should specify whether you would also be interested in presenting an early version of the paper to the 2025 HDCA Conference in Bradford, UK (1st-5th September 2025).

Following review of abstracts, authors will be notified no later than **15th June 2025** whether a full paper will be invited for submission. If invited, please submit full papers online, via the website of the Journal of Human Development and Capabilities no later

than 15th January 2026. Please note that being invited for submission does not imply acceptance of papers.

If you are invited to submit a full paper:

- Please submit full papers online at <https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/cjhd>.
- According to the *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*' guidelines for preparing manuscripts, please send the paper identified as 'Main Document', with all information identifying the authors removed to allow it to be refereed anonymously.
- When submitting, please choose 'Special Issue Article' as the manuscript type, and 'Work, Employment and the Capability Approach' as the Special Issue name.
- Complete instructions for authors can be found at the publisher's website: <https://www.tandfonline.com/action/authorSubmission?journalCode=cjhd20&page=instructions>.

As noted above, we intend to give contributors the opportunity to present early versions of their papers at the HDCA Conference in 2025, during an 'open' Thematic Panel on the topic of the Special Issue. If you express an interest in this when submitting an abstract, then if we invite your abstract for submission we will contact you to ask if you plan to attend the conference (whether online or in-person), and make arrangements for you to co-present an earlier version of the paper at the conference. At this point, those who have not yet registered for the conference would need to pay the registration fee to the HDCA in order to present. Please note that conference registration at the 'early bird' rate is currently scheduled to open on 4th May, and 'regular' registration at the higher rate will open on 4th June, although these dates are subject to change.

For enquiries, please contact the Editors.

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