Social networking for older people's well-being:
An example of applying the capability approach to better understand and organize the designing of ICT services

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The *WeCare* project

The WeCare project (www.wecare-project.eu) runs from 2010 to 2012 and is part of the European *Ambient Assisted Living* (AAL) research programme. The project's aim is to empower older people to participate in online and face-to-face social networking, to promote communication and cooperation—and to help people to increase their well-being. Ten organizations from four countries cooperate in the project (see below).

Our main hypothesis is that when older people participate in social networking, they can improve their well-being.
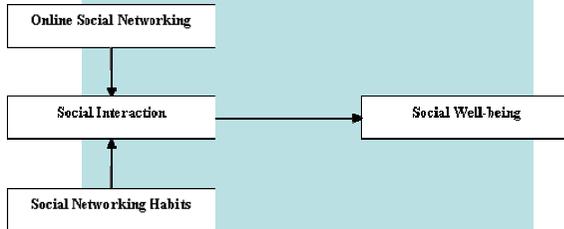
Practically, we develop and evaluate four online social networking services, in Ireland, Finland, Spain, and The Netherlands. These services enable older people, their family members, friends and neighbours to communicate and coordinate activities, and to organize and share (mutual) help.

Overview; People; Calendars; Discussion; Messaging
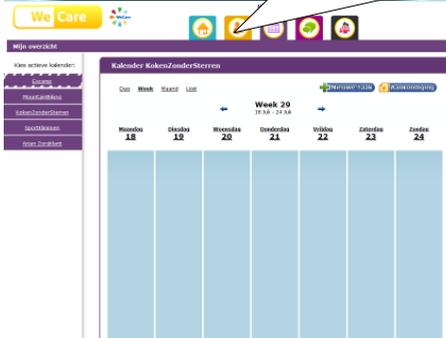
We follow a human-centred design (ISO, 1999; Steen, 2008) approach—we cooperate with older people during research, design and evaluation, and follow a multidisciplinary and iterative approach of trying-out and learning:
• In Ireland technology developer *Skytek* cooperates closely with the *Irish Farmers' Association* and with individual farmers;
• In Finland technology developer *Videra* and research organization *VTT* cooperate closely with care service provider *Caritas* and their clients;
• In Spain research organization *I2BC* and care service provider *FASS* cooperate closely with clients of *FASS* and with people in one community (Lebrija);
• In The Netherlands technology developers *Ericsson* and *Simac* cooperate closely with *ANBO*, which represents older people, and with research organization *TNO*, and with people in one neighbourhood (The Hague).

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The authors work in the *WeCare* project and use the project as an example to explore ways in which the capability approach can help to better understand and organize this particular project and similar (ICT4D) projects.

The capability approach is increasingly being used for better understanding and organizing the design of technology (Oosterlaken, 2009), e.g. in 'ICT for development' (ICT4D) (Oosterlaken & Van den Hoven, 2011; Oosterlaken et al., 2011; Zheng, 2007; Johnstone, 2007). We propose the following (cf. Robeyns, 2003 and 2005) (see figure right):
• Focusing on commodities is 'too little'. We see ICT's as 'only' means that can help to bring about positive change. ICT's can never be goals.
• Focusing on behaviour is 'too much'. We feel that we should not aim to narrowly prescribe people's behaviour in overly detailed ways.
• **Focusing on capabilities is appropriate, 'in the middle'.** The capability approach provides a focus on empowering people, so that they can use relevant commodities and decide for themselves how to organize and live their lives.
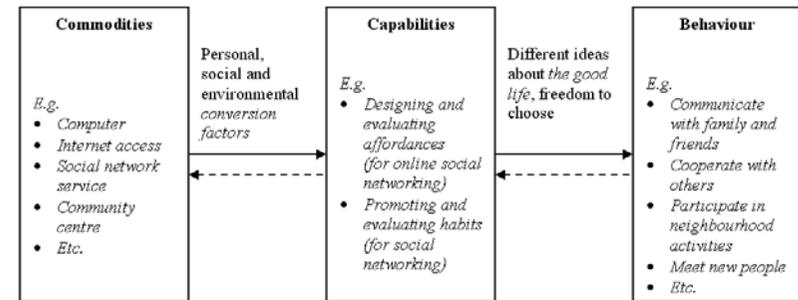
1. Means (ICT) and ends (well-being)

The capability approach helps to start a project with the aim to empower people and to promote their well-being, and then to proceed to explore and develop appropriate and means. **This offers a welcome alternative to *technology push*, which too often occurs in the ICT sector**.

We've constructed ourselves an industrial system that is brilliant on means, but pretty hopeless when it comes to ends. We can deliver amazing performance, but we are increasingly at a loss to understand what to make and why. (Thackara, 2006: p. 189).

2. Designing details (affordances)

The notion of *affordances* (Gibson, 1979; Norman, 1988) draws attention to the values that designers—intentionally or unintentionally—embed in the products and services that they develop (cf. *value sensitive design,* Oosterlaken, 2009). **Thinking about design details in terms of enabling capabilities helps to focus the design process.**

The services that are being developed in the *WeCare* project provide affordances to people for *communication* (live video communication, text-based forums and messaging) and *coordination* (shared calendars, groups and contact details), and enable older people to participate in social networks.

3. Promoting positive habits

The project aims to deliver a list of practical recommendations for citizens—and for technology developers, business developers and policy makers—that will help them to effectively deploy and use social networking services.

We propose to promote the following positive habits—which are thought of at the level of capabilities:
• *Express yourself carefully and express personal feelings;*
• *Spend time online, in terms of frequency and/or duration;*
• *Communicate with people that have similar experiences;*
• *Participate in community activities, especially 'in real life';*
• *Provide and receive support, online and 'in real life';*
• *Give appropriate levels of trust, online and 'in real life';*
• *Act with respect for your own and for other people's privacy.*

4. Empowerment (paradox)

The capability approach focuses on development and freedom, and on organizing processes in which (potential) 'users' participate actively in the project. **There is a paradox when 'we' (designers) organize participation and interventions to empower 'them' (older people).**

"There are a lot of older people out there; let's see if we can find some and help them by giving them this Internet stuff in an easy-to-use format". So we went and found some older people and told them how we had come to help them with the Internet, and they said, "… We don't need your patronising help, you designers. … If you could kindly change your attitude and help us explore how we will live, then perhaps we can do something together". (Thackara, 1999: p. 8-9) .

5. Quantifying capabilities

Many projects are organized and evaluated in terms of *commodities* (e.g. 'the aim to provide 100 households with computers and internet access') or *behaviour* (e.g. 'the goal of increasing the usage of recycled material with 10%'), possibly because these can be quantified relatively easily, as if they are input and output variables. In contrast, it is difficult to quantify capabilities, e.g. in terms of whether people are empowered and experience well-being (Anand et al. 2005; 2011).

In the WeCare project, we will also try to quantify capabilities—e.g. in terms of how people can use the services that were developed, of how they are able to develop positive habits, and of how they are indeed empowered and experience increased well-being. Currently (Summer 2011), the services are being evaluated in trials in which participants' experiences of social well-being before, during and after the trials are studied in four countries.

Furthermore, we aim to explore the dynamics and feedback mechanisms between capabilities and commodities, and between behaviour and capabilities (see dashed arrows).

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