Chapter 1
Introduction

Abstract The introduction presents the most important aspect of the book to the reader. It shortly describes the research and elaborates my experiences as a researcher in the field. Furthermore, it provides some insight into the capability approach. This leads to a discussion of the topic of poverty also in relation to the major outcomes of the research. Towards the end of this chapter, a short reference is made to the Ethiopian history concerning issues of disability and education. Last but not least, the objectives of the book are clarified.

> We have to examine the overall capability that any person has to lead the kind of life she has reason to want to lead, and this requires that attention be paid to her personal characteristics (including her disabilities, if any) as well as to her income and other resources, since both can influence her actual capabilities. (Sen 2004, 3)

Being able to go to school to be educated and to be granted the same opportunities as other children is one of the essential aspects in education. This again is closely related to the future life aspects of income and poverty and hence individual well-being and quality of life.

It is known that about nine out of ten children with disabilities are not schooled in countries of the global South (UNICEF 2013). This is a shocking fact, and it is important to react to this situation in order to create equal possibilities for everyone through equity in education. According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), and not only since this Convention was adopted, education is defined as a human right for everyone.

This book, however, does not explore the majority of children who are not schooled. Instead, the perspective is on those who are lucky enough to be able to attend school. Working from that angle has opened up the opportunity to look at the situation from within the school environment. This is only logical, as attending school is not a guarantee for receiving quality education.

Writing this book has given me the possibility to further develop the ideas and discussions which arose in the context of my research. Even though it was challenging, I have thoroughly enjoyed the experience. Speaking about experiences, the most interesting aspect of my work is without a doubt the challenge and adventure of opening my senses to a new culture, a new society and an unknown country and people.

The research involved 20 children with different disabilities who were attending different schools in the Ethiopian capital. During numerous interviews, they, their parents and their teachers told me about their experiences at school as well as about their hopes, dreams and fears. Listening to them was fascinating for me and made me thankful for their openness. But understanding their stories did not only come through listening. Being aware of my background, I knew I had to be careful concerning the bias I brought with me and the interpretations I would automatically make. I did not know very much about the culture, traditions and way of life of the interviewees. Therefore, it was indispensable to make a great effort to understand all of these aspects and become aware of the meaning and influence which these cultural, societal and traditional environments had on people with disabilities in their society and on their participation in social life. On the following pages, I am going to tell the story of how the children, parents and teachers who participated in my research dealt with challenges in their particular situations in the schools and communities in Addis Ababa, how some of them were able to "develop a sense of belonging" and what education meant for them. The aspect of "feeling like a family" plays a major role in this context. The aim of this book is to explore what all this means and how we can understand the situation of the children with disabilities in their educational environments. In addition, I am going to discuss the significance of inclusive education in relation to equity in education on the grounds of the capability approach (Sen 1979, 2009).

It may not have to be mentioned that conducting this research was one of the greatest opportunities I have had in my academic life so far. The results of this study are striking because of the new aspects which have been revealed.

Arriving in Addis Ababa for the first time in May 2009, it was exciting for me to dive into this new culture and country. Seeing the people, moving around in the city by public transport with all the traffic, smelling the smells and getting used to the thin air, as Addis Ababa lies on 2400 m altitude, were adventures in itself.

One can see lots of children in different kinds of school uniforms at the end of the day or in the morning going to school using public transport. Their uniforms have different colours depending on their school. This makes a colourful scene and, with all the children's voices, a very lively one.

Disability is present everywhere in the city. Lots of the people with disabilities are beggars – children, women and men. However, some schools accept children with disabilities, and hence disability is an issue for these school communities.

Talking to all my interviewees, listening to them sharing their hopes and dreams, seeing the children's motivation to be a good student and being able to help their parents, I became very close to them and emotionally involved in their lives. We know that education is no miracle cure against poverty, but it seemed that many of the participating parents and children were convinced otherwise. One thing that had me thinking the most after having concluded my research was the concern about the high expectations which the children and parents had as soon as the children started school. I became very worried about the future of these children and about whether they would be able to achieve their goals or whether they would lose hope again as soon as they failed to find a job or to finish their education.

However, reality also shows that education does in a considerable number of cases open up spaces and possibilities for leading a better life. This made me wonder about the right to education and, consequently, the question of equity. Looking at these issues from the angle of social justice, it is certainly the aspect of being granted equal opportunities in life and possibilities to participate in social life as a valued member. In other words, educational equity is a main pillar for creating equal chances for individuals to reach a certain quality of life. With Amartya Sen's capability approach in mind, it becomes clear that differences, or inequalities, exist naturally amongst human beings. These inequalities have to be addressed and given special attention when working towards social equity and equality of opportunities. Providing some insight into the capability approach will show clearly what I mean by that.

First of all, why is it called capability approach? Sen explains that "[t]he expression was picked to represent the alternative combinations of things a person is able to do or be – the various 'functionings' he or she can achieve" (Sen 1992/2009, 30). Further exploring the relevant literature, one can find statements like the following: "[Sen] pleaded for a metric of well-being which measured something falling between primary goods and utility […] He called that something 'capability' […]" (Cohen 2009, 17 f). Hence, the capability approach is about the well-being of people (or groups) which can be reached by being or doing the things which they are capable of.

The main reason for developing the capability approach was related to issues of poverty and development. It addresses the aspects of freedom and opportunities in a person's life and asks how this person can live a quality life and reach well-being. Consequently, the capability approach tries to identify value objects "and sees the evaluative space in terms of functionings and capabilities to function" (Sen 1993/2009, 32). One definition used by Sen for development is as the expansion of human freedoms (1999). In his book *Development as Freedom*, Sen speaks of freedom as the primary end and the principal means of development. The first is defined as having a constitutive role and the second as having an instrumental role (1999, 36).

> The constitutive role of freedom relates to the importance of substantive freedom in enriching human life. The substantive freedoms include elementary capabilities like being able to avoid such deprivations as starvation, undernourishment, escapable morbidity and premature mortality, as well as the freedoms that are associated with being literate and numerate, enjoying political participation and uncensored speech and so on. (Sen 1999, 36)

Accordingly, education can lead to certain freedoms of a person. In her recent critical article "Capabilitarianism", Robeyns (2016) offers an alternative perspective on the capability approach. She tries to find a "minimum core that is shared by all capability theories and accounts". The two most important concepts within the capability approach are capabilities and functionings. In 2011 Robeyns – following Sen – already defines capabilities as "a person's real freedoms or opportunities to achieve functionings". Functionings are simply a person's "beings and doings". Her definition of these terms in 2016 does not differ much from this. To explain it even

more clearly, Sen states that capability is "a person's ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being" (2009, 30). With this we can already draw a connection to the research at hand: becoming a valued member in society can be identified as one of the main goals of the children with disabilities who participated in my study.

Sen defined capability as "the ability" to reach these goals. Hence, having the ability does not automatically lead to the real functioning. In other words, most of the children in my study had the ability – hence the capability – to reach the goal of becoming a valued member in society through education, but were not sufficiently supported by their environment. Education, in their view, was one of the major motors to achieve their goals (e.g. being able to support their family by getting a job), which also meant doing valuable acts. From the perspective of "receiving quality education – having better job opportunities – supporting family (reducing poverty) – being valued by society", it becomes clear that educational equity and equal possibilities in education are of major importance, leading to a better quality of life for the individual and, in the particular case of the results of my study, also for the community (supporting the family, contributing to society). Over the last years, the capability approach has been criticised for being too individualistic and neglecting groups and social structures (Robeyns 2005, 109). However, as regards equity in education, the capability approach adds another valuable perspective on the issue. We know that education can lead to better job opportunities. Consequently, not having the possibility to receive quality education can lead to an exclusion from the labour market. "As it happens, the rejection of the freedom to participate in the labor market is one of the ways of keeping people in bondage and captivity […]" (Sen 1999, 7).

More than 80% of the people that I interviewed came from very poor backgrounds. This means that most of the parents were daily labourers and lived on less than 1$ per day. Consequently, poverty was one of the additional challenges that accompanied the children through their day-to-day life.

Poverty is identified as a twofold barrier in this book. Firstly, it influences the children's parents in supporting their children in their education, which can have far-reaching consequences. Secondly, it constitutes a threat to the children with disabilities themselves in cases where their education does not help them to become economically independent after school (or they are not able to go to school at all[1]). Thus, poverty compromises the children's goals that are inherent in their "feeling like a family", amongst which are supporting the parents and "developing a sense of belonging" (to society). It constitutes yet another barrier towards equal opportunities. Thereby opportunities can be seen in possibilities of finding jobs, receiving quality education and participating in social life. Equality in opportunities of participation is the most challenging aspect, as this is "about real life". Michailakis sees an economic aspect within this real life that gains importance for people with disabilities (1997, 28). And this is what is of high relevance for the book at hand when

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[1] Such cases were not included in the sample as the research only focused on children with disabilities who were already attending a school.

talking about poverty and education: it is about the real life of children with disabilities, about their economic independence and about their possibilities to economically support their families. This, together with possibilities of social participation, will define their well-being and quality of life to a great extent.

In this context, the capability approach "[…] offers a broad normative framework to conceptualize and evaluate individual well-being and social arrangements in any particular context or society" (Walker and Unterhalter 2007, 3).

In other words, leading a good life and being able to participate in society as a valued member greatly depend on equity issues during one's life and on the possibilities which are available or unavailable in each individual case. Considering the subject matter of this book, it is a priority to address the goal of reaching educational equity through inclusive education. In my study, I learnt that inclusive education is the goal of the Ethiopian Ministry of Education and that the schools are still far from making such an endeavour reality.

Looking back on Ethiopian history with a focus on children with disabilities, only subtle hints can be found in the literature in connection with education; evidence of a clear development towards education for children with disabilities appears only towards the end of the twentieth and at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Tirussew (2005) states that schools for educating children with disabilities during the last 40 years were mainly managed by foreign missionaries. Most of the children who attended these schools had visual or hearing impairments. The late 1980s saw the beginning of schools for intellectually[2] disabled children (Tirussew 2005, 84). The question arises what aspects led to these developments and what hampered them. Attitudes of people and society in general certainly play an important role. What I want to highlight in this respect is that the cultural background becomes highly relevant – a focus on disability and culture can reveal many interesting things about the people in the respective society: What are people's attitudes towards disability and towards people with disabilities? Where do these attitudes come from? Have they ever changed – and if so, why? And finally, what consequences do certain attitudes have for people with disabilities living in this society? Asking questions like these can be very revealing when looking at children with disabilities and equity in education.

One of the objectives of this book is to answer such questions, aiming to identify barriers and facilitators for children with disabilities in their environment in the area of education. The results of this research only allow a limited insight into complex contexts. Therefore, there is no claim of providing a complete picture of the processes that can be observed within the setting of primary school children with disabilities in their educational environment.

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[2] In this book, the term "intellectual disability" is used instead of the term "learning disability", which personally I would prefer because I think it is more about learning issues than about intellectual issues. This is because in the whole research, the former has been in use much more by the interviewees themselves.

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