

ENOUGH BY DESIGN · CHAPTER FOUR

What a Person Is Able to Be

Chapter Four of Enough by Design

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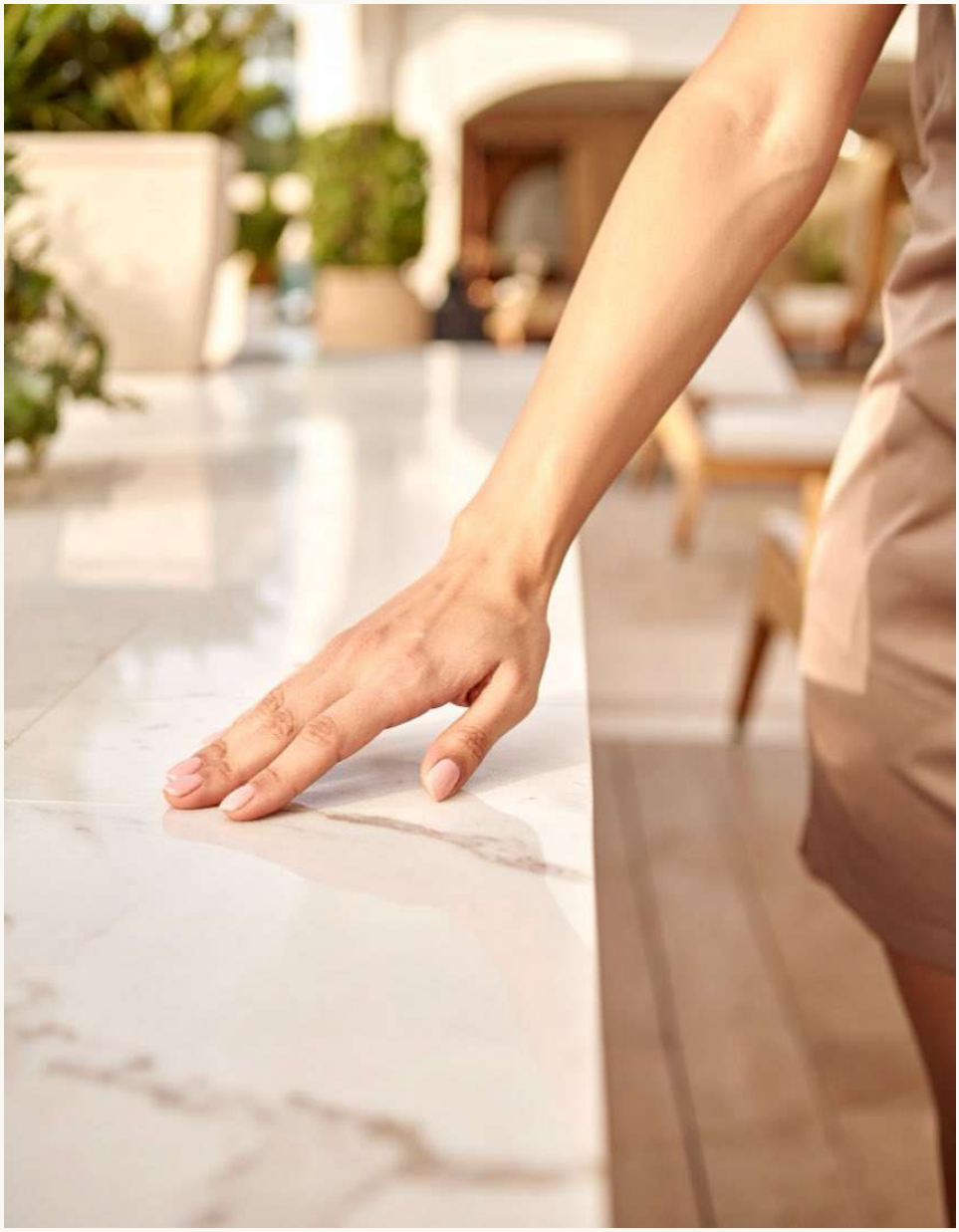
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ABSTRACT

In The Wealth of Nations , Adam Smith paused over a shirt. A linen shirt, he observed, is not strictly a necessity of life; the Greeks and Romans lived comfortably without linen. But in the Europe of his day, a creditable working man would be ashamed to appear in public without one. Custom had made it a necessary, and the want of it a sign of disgraceful poverty. Two centuries later, Amartya Sen picked the shirt up again and used it to settle an argument that had divided the study of poverty for a generation. Was poverty absolute, a matter of falling below a fixed minimum, or relative, a matter of falling behind one's neighbours? In a 1983 paper in Oxford Economic Papers , with the dry title "Poor, Relatively Speaking", Sen answered that it was both, and that the confusion came from measuring in the wrong place. Poverty, he argued, is absolute in the space of capabilities: the ability to appear in public without shame is the same need in every century.

CHAPTER FOUR

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A linen shirt

In *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith paused over a shirt. A linen shirt, he observed, is not strictly a necessity of life; the Greeks and Romans lived comfortably without linen. But in the Europe of his day, a creditable working man would be ashamed to appear in public without one. Custom had made it a necessary, and the want of it a sign of disgraceful poverty.

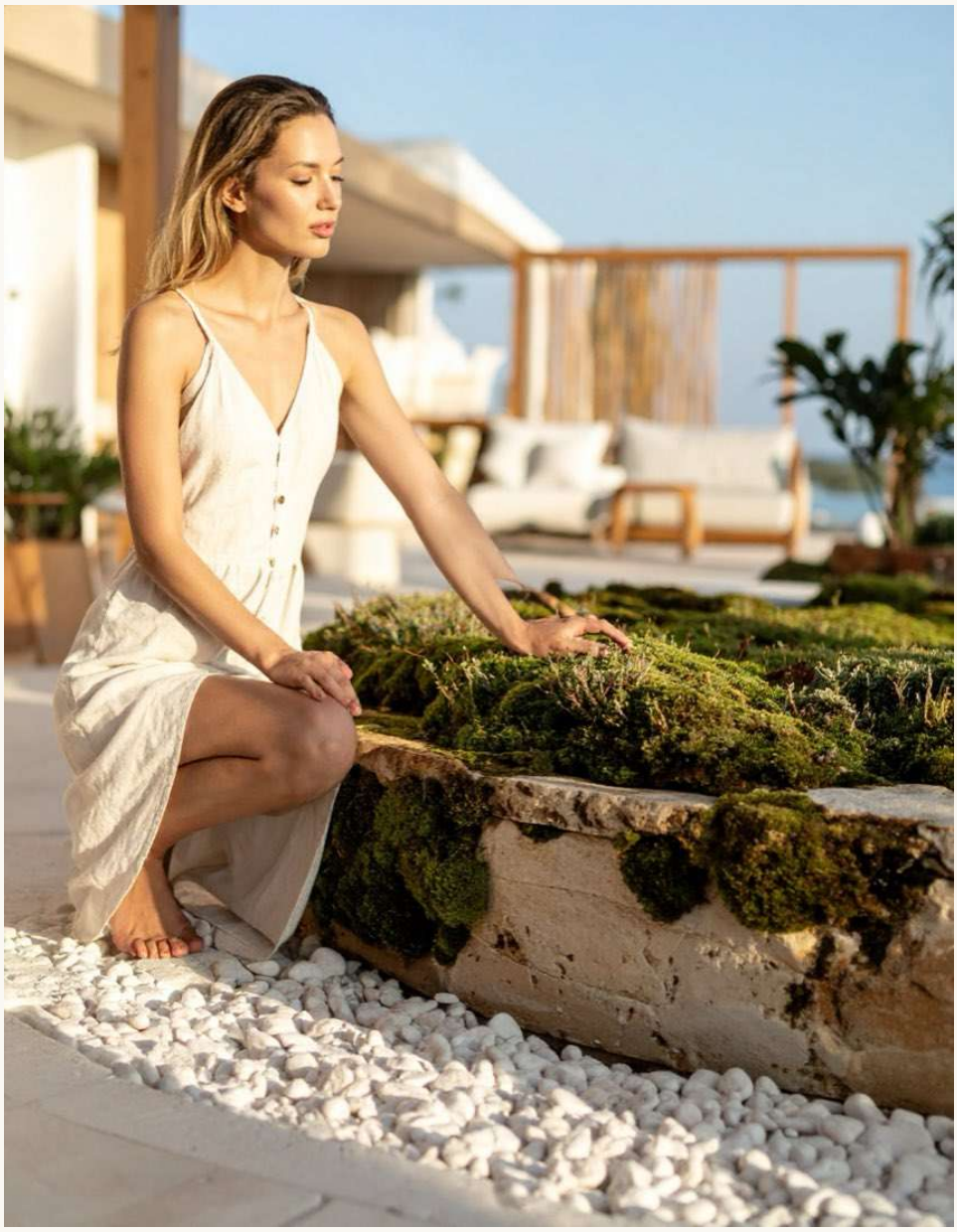
Two centuries later, Amartya Sen picked the shirt up again and used it to settle an argument that had divided the study of poverty for a generation. Was poverty absolute, a matter of falling below a fixed minimum, or relative, a matter of falling behind one's neighbours? In a 1983 paper in *Oxford Economic Papers*, with the dry title "Poor, Relatively Speaking", Sen answered that it was both, and that the confusion came from measuring in the wrong place.[38] Poverty, he argued, is absolute in the space of capabilities: the ability to appear in public without shame is the same need in every century. It is relative in the space of commodities: what it takes to meet that need — a linen shirt in one place, a phone and a decent pair of shoes in another — depends on the society around you.

The point looks technical. It is the hinge of this book. Chapter 2 read Keynes's division of needs into the absolute and the relative, and chapter 3 took up the strongest objection to his forecast: that relative needs make abundance impossible, because no amount of production makes everyone first. Sen's shirt shows that some of what looks relative is, underneath, absolute. The need to belong, to be seen as a full member of one's community, is fixed. What changes is the price of meeting it. And a price is set, at least in part, by design.

Ammanuel Santa Anna's *Ecstatic Economics* asks its central question in a form Sen would recognise. Having accepted Kate Raworth's doughnut — an economy that meets everyone's basic needs within the planet's limits — the book insists on one more dimension:

> *How alive do people feel in the economy we're creating?*[39]

This chapter reads the capability approach beside that question. Sen supplies the measure; the house's living-systems lens supplies a picture of how the measure moves. Together they turn abundance from a feeling into something a household or a team can map on one sheet of paper — which is what the tool at the end of the chapter does.



Doings and beings

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Doings and beings

Sen's approach developed over two decades: in his 1979 Tanner Lecture "Equality of What?", in *Commodities and Capabilities* (1985), and in *Development as Freedom* (1999). Ingrid Robeyns's 2005 survey in the *Journal of Human Development* remains one of the clearest accounts of its structure, and this section follows her vocabulary.[40]

Two words carry the approach. Functionings are the things a person actually does and is: being nourished, being sheltered, reading, working, taking part in the life of the community, being at ease. Capabilities are

the set of functionings a person is genuinely able to achieve, whether or not they choose to. A person who fasts and a person who starves have the same functioning, being underfed. They have different capabilities, because one could eat and the other could not.

Between resources and functionings, Sen placed conversion factors: everything about a person and their circumstances that decides how much functioning a given resource can produce. A bicycle is a resource. For a healthy adult in a flat town with safe roads, it converts into mobility. For a person with a disability, or on a mountain road without a shoulder, it converts into much less. Income works the same way. One salary becomes very different lives depending on health, family obligations, the cost of housing nearby, the reliability of public transport and the norms of the place.

Robeyns is candid about the approach's limits, and a reader should hold them too. It is a framework for evaluation, not a theory that explains why people are poor or rich. It does not, by itself, say which capabilities matter most; Sen deliberately left that list open for public reasoning, while Martha Nussbaum proposed a specific list of central capabilities, and the two positions remain in tension.[40] And measuring capabilities is hard. What someone could have done is less visible than what they did.

With those limits stated, the approach does something no income figure can. It moves the question from *how much does this household have?* to *what is this household able to do and to be, and what is standing between its resources and those doings?*

That second question is the one this book keeps asking. Chapter 1 sorted scarcity into four kinds: material, positional, designed and habitual. Sen's vocabulary lets the sorting become exact. A material scarcity is a shortage of the resource itself. A designed or habitual scarcity is very often a failure of conversion — the resource is there, and something in the arrangement keeps it from becoming a life.

Wealth as a verb

Santa Anna's version of the same move is written in a different register, closer to ecology than to welfare economics. In *Scarcity Is a Design Choice*, the short companion to the book, he describes wealth by what it does rather than what it holds:

> *Wealth is not storage. Wealth is radiance. A battery that never discharges is a paperweight.*[41]

The image is deliberately physical. A battery's value is in its discharge. A store of wealth that never converts into anyone's doing or being is, in Sen's terms, a resource with no functioning attached. In the same passage, Santa Anna draws the conclusion that would serve as a one-line summary of the capability approach: "To stop pretending that wealth is a thing you own and recognize it as a condition you participate in."[41]

A few pages earlier, the same book puts the point about value itself in two short sentences:

> *Value does not live in inventory. It blooms in relation.*[42]

Value emerges, he continues, "when care meets need, when knowledge meets context, when reciprocity meets time."[42] Read beside Sen, that list is a list of conversion factors. Care is a resource until it meets a need; knowledge is a resource until it meets a context in which it can be used. The meeting is where the functioning happens.

The living-systems reading adds something Sen did not set out to provide: a picture of movement. In a living system nothing is valued in isolation. A nutrient matters because of where it flows; a tree, because of what it feeds and shelters; a wetland, because of what it filters. The book makes the economic version of this observation in a sentence about measurement:

> *everything that cannot be priced disappears from the ledger. And then, gradually, it disappears from reality.*[43]

That sentence is the capability approach's warning about income, stated as an ecologist would state it. What a ledger cannot see, it cannot protect. A city that measures only output will not notice it is losing the conversion factors — the safe streets, the public library, the bus that runs on Sunday — that turned its residents' incomes into lives. Output can rise while capability falls. Sen's work on famines, in which people starved in regions that had food because their entitlements to it collapsed, is the extreme case of the same pattern. Chapter 5 follows the sentence into a firm's accounts, where most of what produces value is never written down as an asset at all.

This is where the house's lens is most useful: it treats conversion factors not as fixed conditions but as parts of a system that can be tended. In the *High Frequency Workbook*, a practical companion in the house's canon, Santa Anna describes a household's money as "a financial ecology", the living system of where money comes from, where it goes, "what it nourishes, and what it starves", and adds: "Like any ecology, it can be either regenerative or extractive."[44] A regenerative household ecology is one in which money converts into capabilities that in turn make more of the household's life possible. An extractive one is one in which money leaves, often on habit, and converts into little.



The vitality map

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The vitality map

The Luminous 100, the house's reading of a hundred classical frameworks, includes an upgrade of the Wheel of Life — the coaching exercise in which a person rates their satisfaction across eight or so domains of life and draws the result as a wheel. The standard use of the wheel is to find the low scores and work on them. The upgrade turns the exercise around, recasting the wheel from "a deficit-locator ("which domains are low?") into a vitality map", and asking first: "Where is your life most alive?"[45] It follows with a second

question that a household can actually answer: "What domains carry the most energy, meaning, and flow?"[45]

It also treats the domains as connected rather than separate. They are "organs of a single living system", and the work is to let the vitality in the strong domains "circulate into the ones that feel depleted".[45]

Set this beside Sen and something practical appears. The Wheel of Life, in its standard form, measures functionings — how things are going — and invites more effort where they are going badly. A capability reading asks a further question of each low score: is the person not choosing this functioning, or is something converting their resources poorly? A low score in health might be a choice, a season of other priorities. It might be a conversion failure: a commute that leaves no time to cook, a gym whose hours never match a shift. The response to the first is respect. The response to the second is redesign.



The firm as a set of capabilities

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The firm as a set of capabilities

The same upgrade logic appears in the Luminous 100's reading of the Balanced Scorecard, which describes the scorecard's four perspectives not as a chain of causes but as "a living circulatory system where the four perspectives are organs whose health and interconnection determine organizational vitality".[46] For a leader, that is the capability approach applied to a firm.

Revenue is a resource. The firm's capability is what that revenue can be converted into: the products it can make, the people it can develop, the problems it can take on. The conversion factors are its processes, its trust, its knowledge and its rules. An organisation can be resource-rich and capability-poor, and many are.

Santa Anna is pointed about the habit of mind that hides this. In the section of *Ecstatic Economics* on the vitality-centred workplace, he reads the phrase "human resources" as a confession. People in that view, he writes, are counted as a stock:

> *They are resources — inputs in a production function, costs to be managed, assets to be optimized.*[47]

The capability approach answers the confession directly. A person in a firm is not a resource to be converted; a person is the one whose doings and beings the conversion is for, and also, very often, the conversion factor itself. A senior engineer who teaches is how a training budget becomes skill. A manager who protects four unbroken hours a day is how a salary becomes a finished design. Count only the inputs and the firm will never see what its people make possible.

Abundance, measured this way, shifts its meaning. In commodity terms it is a quantity: more goods per person. Keynes forecast it in those terms, and in the richest countries it largely arrived. In capability terms it is a range: the set of lives a person can actually choose among, or the set of things a team can actually take on. The two can come apart. A household can have more commodities than its grandparents and a narrower range of lives, because the conversion factors — time, proximity, trust, a shared table — have been designed out. A firm can double its budget and do no more than it did, because the budget arrives into the same three approvals and the same meeting that eats every Tuesday.

This is what Santa Anna means when he writes, in the book's opening, that "The crisis isn't that we lack resources."[48] The resources are there. What is in question is the conversion, and conversion is, to a large degree, designed: by the layout of a town, the schedule of a workplace, the rules of a market, the habits of a household. It is in this sense, and only this sense, that the book claims scarcity is a design choice. Nobody designed the water table. Someone designed the bus timetable, the opening hours, the lease and the shift pattern.

The finer points, for a leader

Three practices follow directly, and each is set out more fully in the field manual of chapter 8.

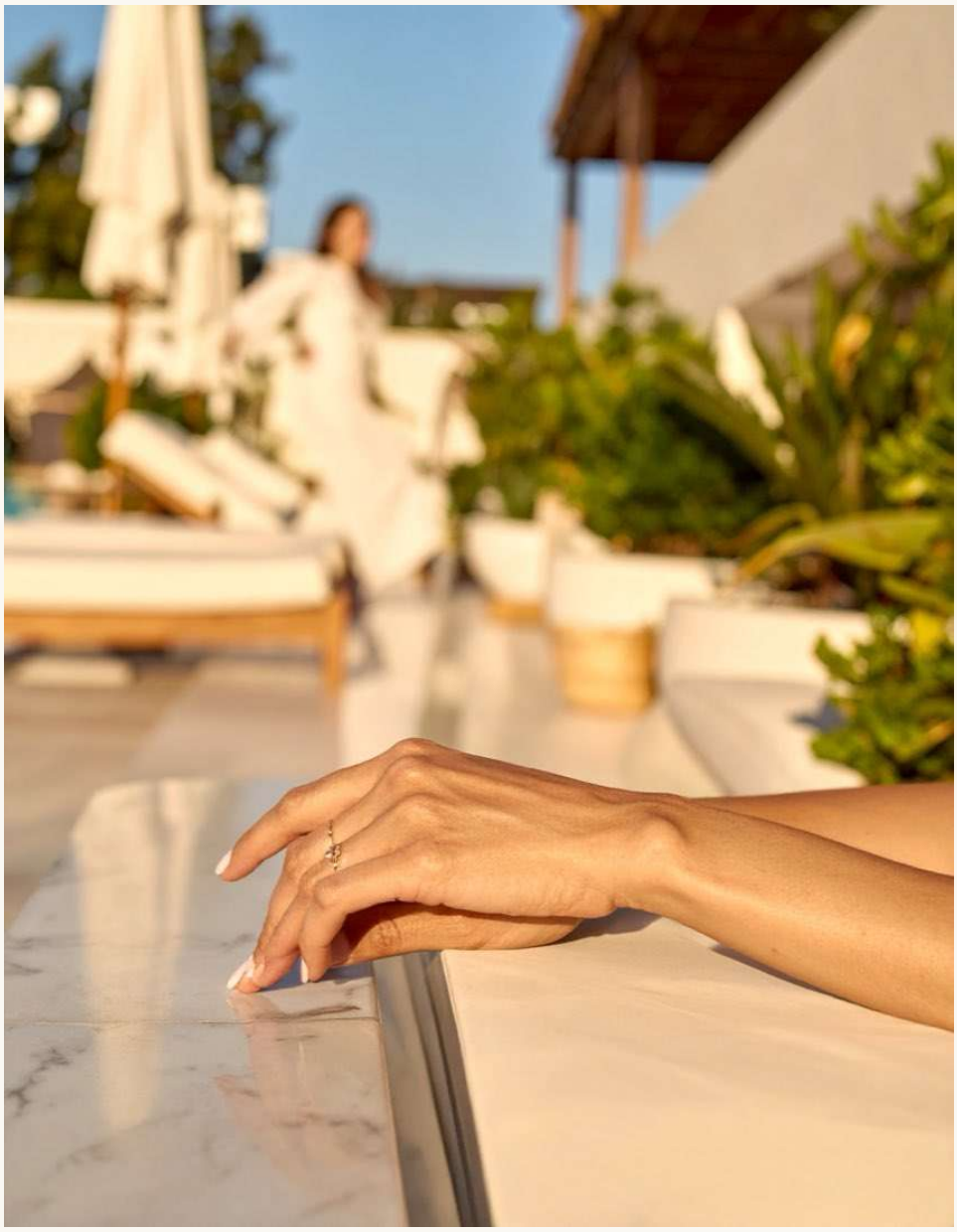
Measure a capability, not only a resource. A training budget is a resource. The capability is the number of people who can now do something they could not do a year ago, and how many of them are actually doing it. The *Alpha OKR* instrument is built to check that a measure tracks an outcome rather than an activity; a

capability is the outcome. Chapter 9 returns to this when it asks how a leader can know that any of the work has made a difference.

Look for the conversion failure before adding resources. If a team is not delivering, the first question is not whether it needs more people or money. It is whether something converts the people and money it has poorly: a process that wastes half a week, a rule that needs three approvals, a meeting rhythm that leaves no unbroken hours. Adding resources to a conversion failure tends to feed the failure.

Treat the capability set as the firm's real balance sheet. Chapter 5 works this through the intangible economy, where the conversion factors — method, knowledge, trust — are most of what a modern firm owns, and where the official accounts see almost none of it.

Two other books in this series come at the same ground from neighbouring directions. Raworth's doughnut, which *Ecstatic Economics* builds on, is read in full in , the book on the economy inside the biosphere. Polanyi's argument that markets are embedded in social life — the capability approach's argument about conversion, made at the scale of a whole society — is read in .



One household, mapped

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One household, mapped

A worked example makes the distinction between a chosen gap and a blocked one easier to hold. The household that follows is a composite, labelled as one, built for teaching; its details were set by the writer, and it does not describe a real family.

Two adults and a ten-year-old live forty minutes by train from the city where both adults work. Their combined income is comfortable by the standards of their region. Asked where life is most alive, both adults

name the same thing first: Saturday mornings at the market, where the child knows the stallholders by name. Asked about health, both score it low. Asked about learning, one adult scores it high, the other low.

The standard Wheel of Life would send them to the gym and to an evening class. A capability reading asks why the scores are low before prescribing effort. The health gap turns out to be blocked, not chosen: both adults would cook more and walk more, and their train timetable means neither is home before seven on four nights a week. The conversion factor is the commute, set partly by the house they chose and partly by an employer's insistence on the same five days in the office. The learning gap for the second adult turns out to be chosen: a season of caring for a parent, with no wish to add anything to it.

The household's response follows the map. The chosen gap is left alone and named as a choice, which, in the composite, the adult in question finds a relief in itself. The blocked gap is examined for the part the household designed. It cannot move house this year. It can ask for one day a week at home, which one of the two employers grants. It can move the cooking to the Saturday market, where the most alive hour of the week already happens, and cook for four nights at once. The resource did not change. The conversion did.

Nothing in this composite proves that such changes improve a household's well-being. It shows only how the map sorts a problem into three kinds: the kind that needs effort, the kind that needs respect, and the kind that needs redesign. Those are three different answers, and the commonest mistake, in households and firms alike, is to give the first answer to all three. Chapter 11 follows a household of this kind across a whole year, and the tool below is where the sorting starts.

The shirt, again

The linen shirt was never really about linen. It was about a man walking into a town square and being taken as one of its own. Smith saw that the price of that walk was set by the town. Sen saw that the walk itself was the thing to measure.

Santa Anna's question — how alive people feel in the economy being made — asks for one more thing: that the walk be not only possible but easy, and that the man arriving in the square find something there worth staying for. In that square, on a market morning, the shirt is a detail. The capability is the man's ease, and the light falls on it.



The Tool: The Capability Map

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The Tool: The Capability Map

For a household or a team of up to twelve. One sheet, ninety minutes the first time, thirty minutes each quarter after.

1 · Name six to eight domains. For a household: home, work, health, learning, close relationships, community, rest, money. For a team: the work itself, skill, collaboration, the people it serves, the tools, rest and pace, money, standing in the wider organisation. Use your own names.

2 · For each domain, fill one row.

DOMAIN	WHERE IT IS MOST ALIVE NOW (ONE LINE)	WHAT WE ARE ABLE TO DO AND BE HERE (CAPABILITY)	WHAT WE ACTUALLY DO AND ARE (FUNCTIONING)	MAIN RESOURCE IT DRAWS ON	MAIN CONVERSION FACTOR HELPING	MAIN CONVERSION FACTOR BLOCKING

Fill the "most alive" column first, for every domain, before any other column. This is the vitality map's order.

3 · Mark each gap between capability and functioning.

- C (chosen): we could, and we choose not to, this season. Leave it, and write that it is a choice.
- B (blocked): we would, and something converts our resources poorly. Go to step 4.

4 · For each B, classify the blocking factor. These match the four kinds of chapter 1.

- Material: a physical limit — distance, health, a fixed sum.
- Designed, ours: a rule, schedule or contract we set and can change.
- Designed, theirs: a rule set by an employer, landlord, institution or market that we can raise, negotiate or route around, but not change alone.
- Habitual: a pattern that has outlived its cause and that everybody keeps — the way the week has always run.

5 · Choose one B in the "designed, ours" or "habitual" class. Write the one change that would improve its conversion, who will make it, and by when. One only.

6 · Choose one strong domain and name how its vitality could reach a weaker one. For example: the evening walk that is already the best hour of the day becomes the place where the money conversation happens.

7 · Date the sheet. In a quarter, re-fill steps 2 and 3 only, and compare. The measure is the number of B gaps that have become C or closed — not the number of resources added. Chapter 9's Prediction Register shows how to write down, before the quarter starts, what you expect to change.

A note on method

The household in this chapter is a composite built for teaching. It is not a real family; its details were set by the writer to show how the map sorts a gap, not to report what happened to anyone.

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