



WISER Perspectives: Multidimensional Drivers of Well-Being in Cape Town's Informal Settlements

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Abstract

Research on well-being has predominantly focused on affluent populations, often neglecting disadvantaged communities and thereby perpetuating their marginalization in both academic and policy discussions. Perspectives from informal settlements—prevalent in the rapidly urbanizing Global South—offer valuable opportunities to expand and challenge prevailing conceptualizations of well-being. Adopting a qualitative approach, the research is based on a case study on placemaking interventions by the Violence Prevention through Urban Upgrading (VPUU) program in Cape Town, South Africa. The program is area-based and aims to enhance quality of life in informal settlements through community agency, co-production, and inclusive governance. Based on focus group discussions, transect walks, and qualitative interviews with residents, the study examines how VPUU's interventions influence residents' perceptions of life satisfaction and thereby highlights the subjective dimensions of well-being. Accordingly, this study explores (1) the role of community involvement in co-producing social infrastructure; (2) the impact of such involvement on well-being; and (3) strategies to support participation and governance. Findings indicate that while economic stability is important, social and human capital are also significant aspects, underscoring the value of social relationships and community support. Based on the VPUU case, the study introduces a novel framework identifying five key drivers of quality of life: (1) eudaimonic (purpose and belonging); (2) altruistic (community support); (3) relational (trust and social capital); (4) formative (skills and safety); and (5) material (economic and environmental conditions). The research concludes with recommendations for context-specific quality-of-life assessments and governance frameworks to sustain improvements in well-being and strengthen social cohesion.

Keywords Quality of life · Well-being · Co-production · Governance · Placemaking · Informal settlement



Introduction

South Africa's longstanding tradition of quality of life research originated in efforts to understand disparities among ethnic groups, considering not only material conditions but also cultural values and socio-political factors (Møller et al., 1987). The township riots of the late 1970s, sparked by Apartheid-era discrimination, initiated a crucial national conversation on the well-being of disadvantaged communities (Møller et al., 1987) and prompted the launch of the South African Quality of Life Trends (SAQoL) study (Møller & Roberts, 2023). This study pioneered combining objective and subjective well-being measures to provide a more holistic assessment of societal progress (Møller, 2013), going beyond economic indicators like income and GDP. By capturing citizens' satisfaction and dissatisfaction along with socio-economic information, the study directly addressed Easterlin's findings on the disconnect between income growth and happiness (Easterlin, 1974) and anticipated economists' recommendations to include non-economic and subjective dimensions when measuring societal progress (Sen, 1985; Stiglitz et al., 2009; Easterlin, 2010).

This integrated approach shaped South African well-being research, as seen in the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), which tracks social attitudes and subjective well-being. Furthermore, innovative methods leverage real-time Big Data on online expressions of subjective emotions, enabling insights into how socio-economic and political changes affect perceptions of happiness (Rossouw & Greyling, 2020; Greyling & Rossouw, 2025). Regional and local surveys, such as the Gauteng City-Region Observatory's Quality of Life Survey, and municipal-level studies further enrich the landscape, but also reveal persistent inequalities often demonstrated by large standard deviations (Bothma & Veenhoven, 2024). This indicates that aggregated quantitative data can uncover entrenched social divides, yet it is limited in comprehensively reflecting the specific experiences of marginalized groups, particularly those in informal settlements. In response, disaggregated studies focusing on quality of life in these communities have been conducted since 2007 (e.g. Richards et al., 2007; Darkey & Visagie, 2013; Brown-Luthango et al., 2016). These localized studies provide recommendations for future research to move beyond traditional categories such as standard of living, service delivery, and employment. They emphasize the importance of including additional subjective dimensions of well-being—such as feelings of belonging, social connectedness, and quality of governance (Richards et al., 2007). Drawing on this extensive quality of life research in South Africa at national, regional, local, and thematic levels, the latest edition of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC)'s State of the Nation series focuses on quality of life and well-being. It emphasizes that quality of life extends beyond economic factors, underscoring the significant role of individuals' capacity to shape their own lives and provide support to others in comprehending well-being (Reddy et al., 2024). This resonates with recent reports that highlight the role of community structures for subjective well-being in Sub-Saharan Africa (Burger et al., 2026).

This study builds on the arguments for considering self-efficacy and agency in enhancing quality of life, incorporates recommendations to include subjective dimensions (Richards et al., 2007), and draws on South Africa's expertise in subjective quality of life and well-being assessments. It seeks to provide an alternative to

aggregated statistics by adopting a dual approach: First, it centers on a geographically targeted study of an informal settlement of Cape Town. Thereby it shifts the lens from broad, aggregated populations to a disaggregated, purposively selected subset. Second, the methodology prioritizes qualitative research methods to explore the factors influencing well-being. Particular attention is given to the interplay between various well-being domains and the roles of civic engagement, co-production, and governance. This approach is designed to yield nuanced insights that can inform more tailored and effective strategies for enhancing well-being within informal settlements.

With this approach, the study aims to contribute to closing a significant gap regarding qualitative research on governance processes and co-production with respect to quality of life and well-being in informal settlements. In general, the study's framework is informed by the subjective well-being tradition (Veenhoven, 2005), measuring apparent—as opposed to assumed—quality of life. It also draws on the ethics-based well-being school and the capability approach (Sen, 1985; Nussbaum, 2000), considering individuals' abilities to pursue meaningful activities (Sen, 2009) and examining their impacts on different forms of livelihood capital (DFID, 1999).

This study is part of the EU-funded WISER¹ research project (2023–2026), which seeks to identify non-economic drivers that contribute to sustainable quality of life and well-being. The Department of International Urbanism and Design at the University of Stuttgart, Germany is collaborating with Violence Prevention through Urban Upgrading (VPUU) in Cape Town, South Africa, to examine these drivers in the context of Monwabisi Park, an informal settlement in Khayelitsha on Cape Town's south-eastern periphery. Previous research outputs include an analytical framework for the study and a review of the governance structures of the interventions (Annisa et al., 2024). The research further already explored the interdependencies between co-production and well-being (Annisa et al., 2025a). A subsequent research report provides a comprehensive overview of findings (Annisa et al., 2025a), highlighting community participation in the co-production of social infrastructure, its impacts on quality of life and well-being, and recommendations for fostering meaningful participation and responsive governance. This contribution summarizes key aspects of these research outputs and extends this body of knowledge by introducing a novel framework that delineates the multidimensional drivers of well-being. By distinctly classifying these drivers into five categories, the framework facilitates the identification of mutually reinforcing effects and offers an original lens for understanding the intricate dynamics of informal settlements. Most notably, this approach seeks to bridge the gap between drivers of well-being and actionable policy recommendations, positioning the framework as a significant contribution to well-being research.

Research Background

This research is grounded in theoretical discussions about how residents of marginalized urban areas can take an active role in shaping and enhancing their environments, particularly with the support of intermediary organizations that foster innovative

¹ Acronym for *WELL-BEING IN A SUSTAINABLE ECONOMY REVISITED*.

forms of democracy and civic engagement (Mitlin, 2008). Understanding the relationship between such forms of urban governance and well-being is instrumental for future urban development particularly in rapidly growing contexts. However, it is still an understudied field when it comes to informal settlement communities (te Lintelo et al., 2018).

This research acknowledges the complexities and difficulties these communities face, while highlighting the agency of individuals without idealizing their circumstances. The subsequent subsections provide a summary of the discourse on how co-production and placemaking empower informal settlement communities; the governance issues in South Africa's informal settlements; and an overview of strategies for governance and violence prevention implemented in Monwabisi Park.

Co-Production and Placemaking as Enabling Aspects of Informal Settlement Communities

The concepts of co-production and placemaking have received growing scholarly attention in recent decades (Lee et al., 2024). Co-production refers to collaborative processes where community members and stakeholders jointly design, implement, and maintain urban interventions. Placemaking, as described by Schneekloth and Shibley (1995), captures the dynamic ways individuals and communities shape the physical and social character of their environment, fostering a unique sense of place and identity. A sense of place encompasses not only conscious awareness but also emotional attachments and subconscious connections to specific locations (Shamai, 1991). Research suggests that a strong sense of place positively influences individuals' willingness to participate in co-productive activities, as it is tied to personal fulfillment and a sense of ownership (Manzo & Perkins, 2006; Thompson & Prokopy, 2016; Ellery & Ellery, 2019; Meeniyagoda et al., 2023; Puerari et al., 2018). Placemaking is closely associated with the creation of social infrastructure, which is seen as essential for mitigating inequality (Klinenberg, 2018). Studies from informal settlements show that community groups use placemaking as a strategic tool for upgrading their environments (Combrinck & Mulder, 2026; Ley, 2019), and participation in these processes can further deepen the sense of place.

Together, co-production and placemaking are recognized as integral to good governance, which emphasizes participation, transparency, trust, and accountability. In this context, co-production and co-creation are increasingly recognized as effective strategies for participatory planning, fostering inclusiveness, empowerment, and addressing challenges of declining public sector legitimacy and limited resources (Osborne et al., 2018; Fokdal & Ley, 2018; Brandsen et al., 2018). These collaborative practices also contribute to strengthening social capital and improving environmental quality (Corcoran et al., 2018), both of which are considered essential components of quality of life in the OECD framework (OECD, 2013). When examined through the lens of informal settlements, these concepts demonstrate how co-production and governance can reinforce social relations and empower communities, beyond improvements to material conditions.

Informal Settlements and Governance in the Context of South Africa

Cape Town, South Africa's second-largest metropolitan municipality, faces a critical housing and service delivery backlog. As of 2022, 19% of households lived in shacks without adequate access to sanitation (SACN, 2022), and both the number and size of informal settlements continue to increase (Cinnamon & Noth, 2023). This growth is unevenly distributed, mirroring historic patterns of racial segregation and persistent socioeconomic inequalities (Naidoo, 2021; Visagie et al., 2025). While areas near the city center and along the Atlantic coast remain predominantly middle- to upper-class, low-income townships and informal settlements are increasingly concentrated in the Cape Flats, southeast of the central business district. These districts face acute systemic, structural, and governance challenges, leaving residents particularly vulnerable in terms of quality of life and well-being. Inadequate service delivery has eroded trust in government, sparking frequent—often violent—protests and perceptions of corruption and unresponsiveness. High rates of crime and gang violence further undermine governance (Drivdal, 2016). With formal governance frameworks often lacking or poorly implemented, informal governance structures and local leadership have emerged to fill the gap (Drivdal, 2016). Strengthening relational governance and promoting community engagement in informal settlements is therefore essential for building more responsive systems that recognize residents' agency and active roles as stakeholders.

South Africa's governance structure is rooted in a complex history that has shaped its local self-governance systems. Under apartheid, a majority of South Africans were systematically excluded from democratic rights, and their interests neglected. The 1994 transition to democracy marked a shift toward decentralized, participatory local government, as established in the 1996 Constitution and the White Paper on Local Government (Republic of South Africa, 1998a). This new, people-centered approach drew inspiration from township civic organizations that emerged during the anti-apartheid resistance, culminating in the formation of the South African National Civic Organization (SANCO) in 1992. SANCO played a pivotal role in local government reform and continues to influence urban development (Seekings, 1997). However, after apartheid, SANCO's influence declined as it was incorporated into formal institutional structures, while new grassroots movements—often supported by NGOs—emerged (Ley, 2010).

The post-apartheid era also saw significant changes in vertical state governance. Local government gained increased autonomy and developmental responsibilities, operating as one of three spheres—local, provincial, and national. Although municipalities function independently, they are interconnected through intergovernmental collaboration in policymaking, budgeting, and program implementation (CoGTA, 2024). Legislation such as the Municipal Structures Act (Republic of South Africa, 1998b) and the Municipal Systems Act (Republic of South Africa, 2000) defined municipal responsibilities and administrative frameworks. Large municipalities, like Cape Town (with over 500,000 voters), are classified as Metropolitan Municipalities and are subdivided into wards, each represented by its own councilor. Metropolitan Councils, led by an executive mayor, are composed of councilors elected through proportional representation and by ward. Councils are responsible for bud-

gets, Integrated Development Plans (IDPs), and service delivery, while municipal administrations implement these decisions (CoGTA, 2024). At the local level, ward committees—comprised of ten elected members—serve as advisory bodies, facilitating communication and submitting recommendations to councilors or the municipal council.

Horizontal governance and community participation are institutionalized through ward committees, mandated involvement in IDPs, and various participatory mechanisms (Ley, 2010). The Municipal Structures Act from 1998 requires municipalities to consult with communities and organizations in executing their functions (People's Assembly, 2025). However, despite these participatory policies, implementation often falls short. Barriers such as poor communication and top-down decision-making persist (Silima & Auriacombe, 2013). Ward committees and civic organizations like SANCO are intended to bridge municipalities and communities but may be co-opted for political gain, leading to gatekeeping and hindering development (Delphus et al., 2025; Heller, 2003). Academic literature identifies governance challenges (e.g., corruption, mismanagement, political instability, lack of accountability), structural constraints (e.g., limited resources), and systemic issues (e.g., apartheid legacy, inequality, rapid urbanization) as key contributors to persistent development backlogs (Maile & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2023; Mamokhere, 2023; Thusi & Selepe, 2023). These factors undermine service delivery and quality of life in South African municipalities. As a result, many scholars argue that formal governance arrangements are insufficient and advocate for more relational, practice-based models that better reflect the realities of local governance (Ley, 2010).

Governance and Violence Prevention in Monwabisi Park

Since initial settlement activities in 1996, Monwabisi Park has grown dynamically at the southern edge of the Cape Flats (see Fig. 1), especially following the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced many into informal housing after job losses (see e.g., du Plessis, 2022; Smit, 2021). By 2024, the settlement housed over 43,000 residents in more than 13,000 households, nearly doubling its structures in just seven years (VPUU, 2024). Especially the more recently developed parts of the settlement face severe service shortages, including a lack of electricity. The socioeconomic challenges are significant: about 84% of residents live below the poverty line (Brown-Luthango et al., 2016), with high unemployment, ongoing marginalization (Ley et al., 2021), and elevated levels of violence. The persistent lack of economic opportunity is a major contributor to this violence (Matzopoulos et al., 2020).

To address such complex issues as present in Monwabisi Park, the Violence Prevention through Urban Upgrading (VPUU) program was launched in 2005. Drawing on theories of social, situational, and institutional violence as well as Galtung's framework of direct, cultural, and structural violence (Galtung, 1969), VPUU recognizes unhealed trauma as a root cause (Jayakumar, 2019). VPUU is recognized nationally as a model for "Safety through Environmental Design," and its principles have been integrated into the national White Paper on Safety and Security published in 2016 (Civilian Secretariat of Police, 2016). VPUU adopts an integrated, area-based strategy to enhance community well-being, focusing on governance principles such

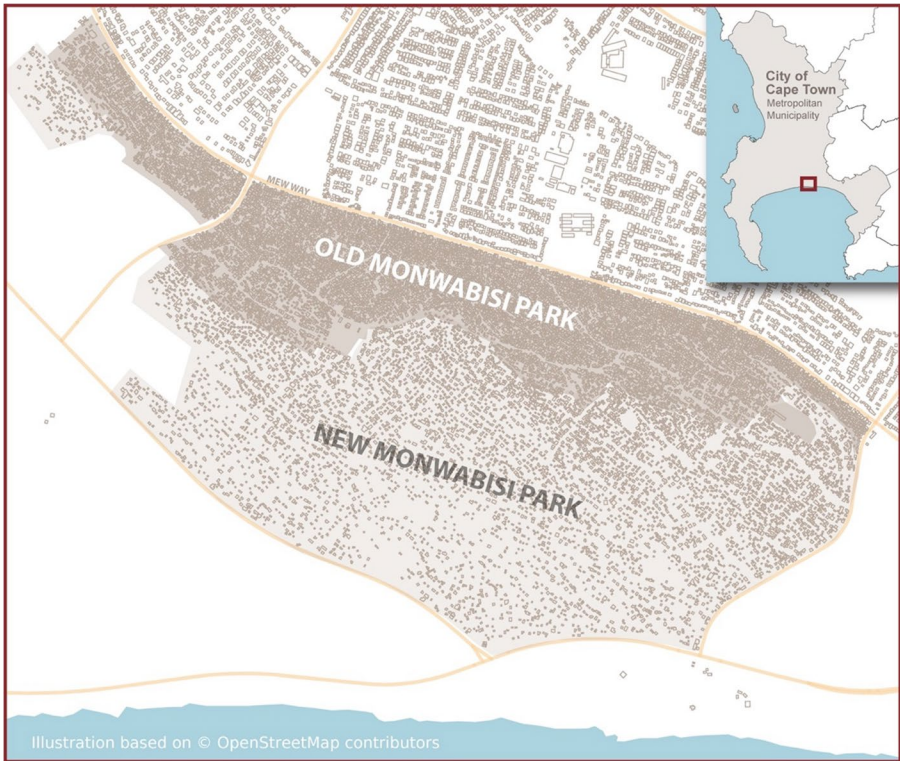


Fig. 1 Expansion of the informal settlement Monwabisi Park (Annisa et al., 2025b)

as responsibility, accountability, transparency, and effectiveness. Its core objectives include: (1) crime prevention through social development and support for victims; (2) advancing institutional development via leadership training and mentorship; and (3) situational crime prevention through infrastructure and service upgrades (Krause, 2011; Krause et al., 2014). These efforts are codified in Community Action Plans (CAPs), which articulate local needs and organize interventions—especially those suitable for co-production. The approach is recognized in the national South African Integrated Urban Development Framework² (CoGTA, 2016) as a positive example that aligns community-driven initiatives with integrated planning.

The VPUU program is aligned to development priorities at different levels: national (IUDF, the Integrated Crime and Violence Strategy, National Development Plan (see NPC, 2012)), provincial (Building safer communities for people and the economy to thrive (NPC, 2012)), and municipal priorities as outlined in the IDP. It is supported by the City of Cape Town and implemented through a non-profit organization with the same name, which established collaborative governance arrangements. These arrangements incorporate existing community initiatives and introduce three tiers of intermediaries: VPUU (linking community and local government), the Safe

² The national South African Integrated Urban Development Framework (CoGTA, 2016) is a key policy document for urban development in South Africa.

Node Area Committee (SNAC, connecting community groups), and Change-Makers (local residents employed on short-term contracts through Public Employment Programs, with VPUU as an intermediary, providing tangible economic benefits to the community). This multi-tiered structure, depicted in Fig. 2, ensures broad stakeholder participation in planning, decision-making, and implementation, while also delivering tangible economic benefits to the community.

Methods

The study uses a phenomenological perspective (Taylor et al., 2015), with the benefit of acknowledging complexity and context with a holistic approach. Using explorative and inductive reasoning (see, e.g., Ochieng, 2009), it aims to deepen understanding of a specific societal problem (Queirós et al., 2017). The study follows a non-hierarchical, eye-level approach (Taylor et al., 2015) to capture authentic perceptions of social processes through qualitative methods. This perspective is especially relevant when working with a marginalized community.

This research employs a case study research strategy, focusing on the Violence Prevention through Urban Upgrading (VPUU) program implemented in some of South Africa's informal settlement communities. The VPUU program serves as an exemplary case, providing valuable insights into co-produced social infrastructure interventions. It enables an assessment of how such initiatives—and their collaborative processes—impact residents' perceived quality of life and well-being.

Employing an inductive methodology, the research explores the interplay between co-production, well-being, placemaking, and good governance (see Fig. 3). It con-

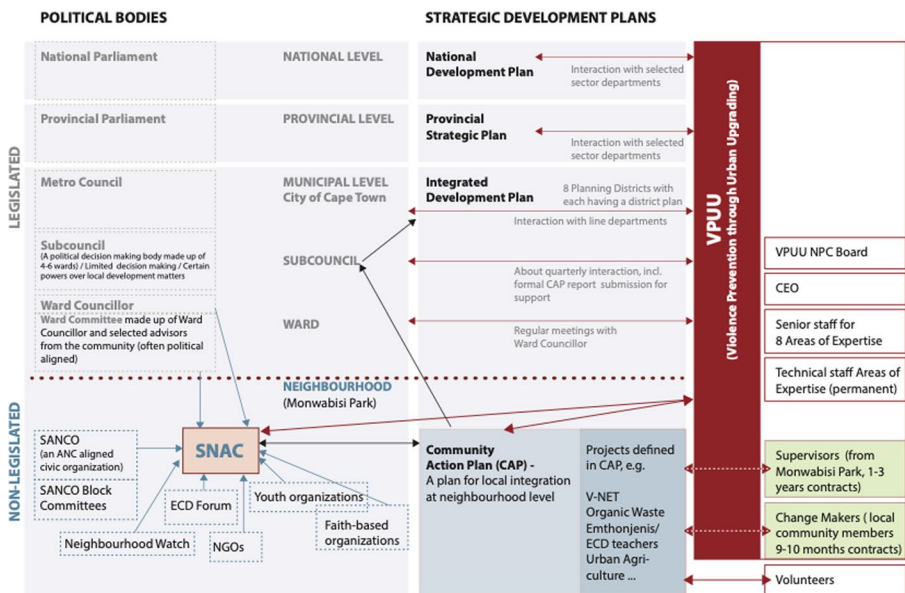


Fig. 2 Key actors of the local governance arrangement in Monwabisi Park (Annisa et al., 2025b)

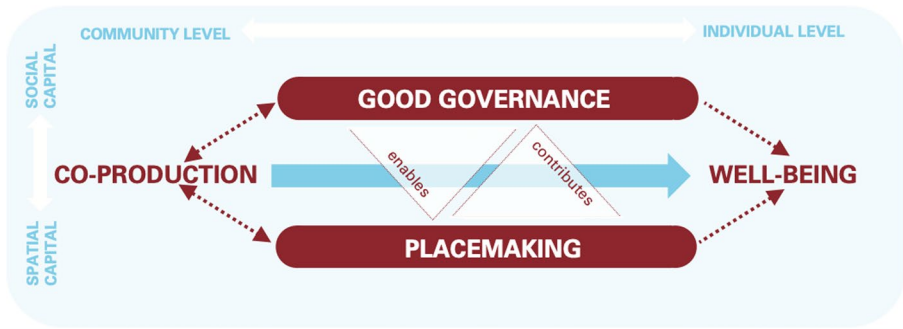


Fig. 3 Conceptual framework (Annisa et al., 2024)

ceptualizes placemaking as a socially constructed process, enabling analysis of how placemaking shapes and is shaped by governance practices (Annisa et al., 2024). The study highlights the reciprocal nature of placemaking and co-production: co-production is vital for implementing placemaking strategies, while successful placemaking can, in turn, increase community engagement in co-production. Likewise, co-production and good governance are mutually reinforcing—sound governance creates the conditions for effective co-production, and co-production helps build self-organizing structures that can contribute to inclusive governance (Annisa et al., 2025a).

The study views quality of life and well-being as multifaceted concepts encompassing both subjective and objective factors. To examine how co-production and governance influence well-being, an analytical model is developed and applied, drawing on the OECD's Better Life Index (BLI) and its guidelines for measuring subjective well-being (OECD, 2013). Well-being is grouped into three clusters of domains: (1) material conditions (e.g., housing, income, wealth), (2) quality of life (including employment, health, education, social ties, environment, security), and (3) subjective well-being (comprising life satisfaction, emotional states, and sense of purpose). This structure is designed to emphasize the relationship between tangible (material) and intangible (quality of life and subjective) factors, illustrating their combined impact on individual well-being. Additionally, the model also integrates the five livelihood capitals from the Sustainable Livelihood Approach (SLA)—natural, physical, economic, human, and social capital (DFID, 1999)—for a broader perspective. This analytical model enables an in-depth exploration of how co-production and governance influence community livelihoods in informal settlements, ultimately aiming to enhance well-being (Annisa et al., 2024) (Fig. 4).

The analytical model is applied to four co-produced interventions within the VPUU program in Monwabisi Park—a densely populated area in southwestern Khayelitsha characterized by informal dwellings and limited infrastructure. To address living conditions and foster a sense of place and ownership, the VPUU program has partnered with the community to develop key social infrastructure projects, which serve as embedded case studies in the context of this research: (1) Emthonjeni, a multifunctional facility that combines Early Childhood Development (ECD) services with public space, supporting both children and adults; (2) Urban Food Gardens, which transform unused land into productive gardens, enhancing food security and

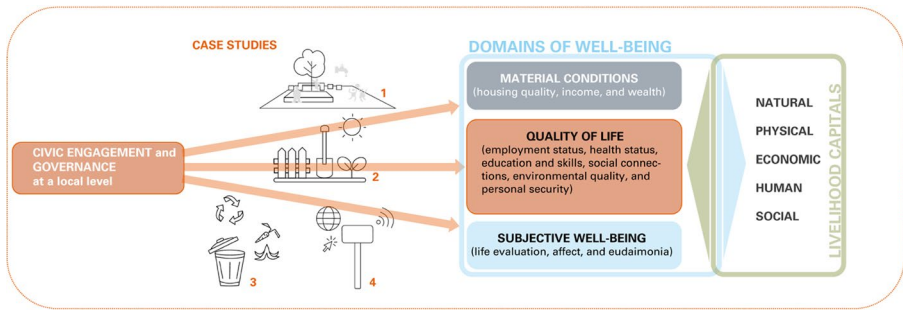


Fig. 4 Analytical model

supporting local ECD centers; (3) the Waste-to-Resource initiative, which establishes a sustainable, community-driven waste management cycle through composting; and (4) V-NET, a co-produced WiFi network that advances digital inclusion by offering affordable internet access and local content (see Fig. 5).

Qualitative data collection was conducted during an on-site community workshop in October and November 2024, incorporating several methods (see Fig. 6). A joint focus group discussion using participatory mapping provided an initial overview of the area and the level of community engagement. This was followed by four project-specific focus group discussions, each with 8 to 12 community members, to gain deeper insight. Participants in both rounds of focus group discussions were chosen through a community-based process. Monwabisi Park's Safe Node Action Commit-



Fig. 5 The four types of embedded case studies (Annisa et al., 2024)



Fig. 6 Qualitative data collection in Monwabisi Park (Annisa et al., 2025b)

tee employed purposive sampling to identify individuals with relevant expertise in the case studies and direct involvement in various phases of the projects. These individuals were invited to participate in focus group discussions as local experts, providing valuable insights and in-depth knowledge.

Subsequently, four transect walks with VPUU representatives and local residents enabled direct observation of the implementation and impact of the four embedded case studies. During the transect walks, go-along interviews were conducted with respect to the interests of the participants, focusing on what was being demonstrated by the community members and VPUU staff. Participants in the go-along interviews were selected through convenience sampling, enabling open encounters with a diverse range of community members to broaden feedback on experiences with the VPUU program and its embedded case studies.

In addition, eighteen semi-structured interviews with community members were conducted. Participants for these interviews were again selected through a community-based process. Selection followed specific criteria: (a) individuals who played an active role in the case studies, and (b) those who benefited from or utilized the case studies. This criterion-based sampling approach aimed to identify differences in perceptions of the case studies' impact on quality of life and well-being, and to facilitate

meaningful comparisons of interview responses. The interview guide covered eight thematic modules—including life satisfaction, civic engagement, and social, human, economic, physical, and natural capital — to capture detailed perspectives. The interview questions were structured according to the analytical framework (Fig. 4) and blended standardized Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI) items—ensuring cross-cultural validity (International Wellbeing Group, 2024)—with open-ended questions on quality of life domains and livelihood capitals. Before the community workshop, on-site testing of the interview guide with VPUU experts and community members helped identify and resolve comprehension issues, enhancing both usability and appropriateness to the context. Recognizing that life satisfaction is highly context-specific and shaped by cultural and socioeconomic factors (Diener et al., 2003), the research emphasized the importance of contextualizing quality of life assessments. For instance, in communities like Monwabisi Park, where employment is scarce, the concept of work-life balance—a domain in the BLI—may not be relevant and could cause confusion. As a result, this dimension was excluded, and, besides this, abstract PWI measures were introduced with particular sensitivity to context. Open-ended questions were asked first to establish background and clarify uncertainties, ensuring that subsequent standardized PWI items were appropriately understood.

At the conclusion of the community workshop, focus group participants were invited to return, and the research team shared a preliminary summary of impressions and key insights from the qualitative data collection. This process allowed for additional feedback from community members and helped ensure that aspects important to residents were accurately reflected. Additionally, follow-up expert interviews with the VPUU CEO and project leaders provided critical insights into project design, execution, and community involvement, as well as governance structures related to the VPUU program.

VPUU offered guidance on developing context-specific methods and the spatial settings in which to implement them, ensuring the research process was a positive experience for all participants. All participants were informed about the study's purpose and provided written consent before being interviewed, including consent to publish photographs documenting the research process. Participation was voluntary, and measures were taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity in reporting the findings.

All interview and focus group discussion transcripts were thematically coded and analyzed using the reflexive thematic analysis approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) in a three-stage process. The first stage involved initial coding to identify emerging patterns and key concepts. In the second stage, these codes were synthesized into broader themes reflecting participants' experiences and perspectives on their involvement in the case studies and the impact of the case studies on their quality of life and well-being. The analytical framework developed at the start of the research guided the entire process, ensuring consistency and rigor. Coding was managed using the qualitative data analysis software MaxQDA, which streamlined the organization and analysis of codes across transcripts. MaxQDA also facilitated the visualization of code relationships and overlaps, allowing for effective mapping of theme frequency and connections within and between documents. In the third stage, the results of thematic coding were used to identify themes that contributed to

improvements in quality of life and well-being in informal settlements. These themes were mapped to specific quality of life domains to visualize their causal influences and confirm their roles as drivers of positive change. Themes were then sorted by their attributes and systematically grouped based on shared characteristics. This process enabled the deductive establishment of broader categories of drivers for quality of life and well-being. The initial mapping of causal influences was then abstracted to these condensed categories, providing a clearer depiction of mutual influences and reinforcing dynamics among the different categories of drivers.

Overall, the research team's methodological approach sought to explore novel strategies for enhancing the contextualization of quality of life and well-being assessment, thereby contributing to the advancement of the research field at the methodological level. Nevertheless, the study's approach was subject to several methodological limitations. The participants were purposively selected, which enabled rich insights, but limits the generalizability of findings. Also, the limited timeframe and dependence on a small number of interview partners accessed through VPUU may have restricted the diversity of perspectives included in the research. Moreover, this implies that the findings do not reflect the heterogeneity of the settlement and therefore do not allow for analysis of data related to factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, or length of residence. Furthermore, research bias and the positionality of the authors could have influenced both the interpretation of data and participants' understanding of questions. To mitigate these issues and enhance the credibility of findings, triangulation of findings was incorporated through the combination of semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and transect walks. This strengthened the reflexivity and thematic coding process.

Findings

The findings derived from the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions offer nuanced insights into the influence of the VPUU program and its embedded case studies on participants' quality of life and well-being. The results are organized as follows: current and anticipated levels of life satisfaction are addressed first, followed by the presentation of eudaimonic and affective dimensions. Subsequently, material conditions and additional quality of life domains are summarized. The presentation of qualitative findings concludes with an overview of key drivers and their attributes, which are linked to descriptive categories.

Residents' Perception of Life Satisfaction

In response to the first questions concerning general life satisfaction, residents reported a moderate level of satisfaction, with a few deviations towards a low and high perception of life satisfaction. Employment status within the quality of life (QoL) domains stood out as the most influential theme, frequently cited as both a key contributor and a significant detractor from life satisfaction. Social connections, particularly relationships with friends and family, were also commonly mentioned as enhancing life satisfaction. Furthermore, self-efficacy gained through civic engage-

ment—especially through active participation in community activities—was highlighted as a positive influence (see Table 1).

When asked about their anticipated life satisfaction five years into the future, most interviewees expected substantial improvements in their well-being. The factors they believed would enhance future satisfaction spanned several quality of life domains. Employment was again cited as an important aspect likely to contribute to this future life satisfaction. Many participants emphasized their aspirations to start their own business or further develop existing self-employment ventures (see Table 2). Some also referenced skills and knowledge gained through the VPUU program as instrumental in supporting their entrepreneurial goals.

Education and skill development were widely recognized as pivotal to improving future life satisfaction. Interviewees anticipated that progress in these areas would lead to higher income and wealth, better housing quality, and stronger social networks, connecting aspirations across multiple domains.

As a follow-up, respondents were also asked to reflect on their satisfaction with personal achievements to date. On average, they reported moderate satisfaction with these achievements, though responses varied from complete dissatisfaction to high satisfaction. Interviewees most often expressed contentment with the development of social relationships—especially within their immediate families—and with their educational and skill attainment. Employment status, however, related to both positive and negative evaluations of personal achievement (see Table 3).

Residents' Perception of Eudaimonic and Affective Dimensions

Responses to questions about future life satisfaction and personal achievements reveal that most interviewees maintain an optimistic outlook. Further analysis of the eudaimonic dimension reinforces this perspective, as participants often highlight cen-

Table 1 Selected quotations exemplifying the three QoL domains that were predominantly referenced in the context of current life satisfaction (Annisa et al., 2025b)

<i>Interview question: WHAT ASPECTS MAKE YOUR LIFE SATISFYING AT THE MOMENT?</i>	
(● = diminishing current satisfaction, ● = enhancing current satisfaction)	
QoL-domain EMPLOYMENT STATUS	<i>"I'm not satisfied at all. I will be satisfied if I can get a permanent job."</i> (V1, Pos. 28)
	<i>"The only thing that is not satisfying me is not having a job."</i> (OW2, Pos. 60)
	<i>"I managed to find a job and I managed to buy a house from all that with the job I got."</i> (OW1, Pos. 11)
	<i>"VPUU gives us jobs and then we've got the schools for the children's, all the schools. And then we've got taps for the water."</i> (OW3, Pos. 28)
QoL-domain SOCIAL CONNECTIONS	<i>"Living with my son, seeing him growing every day"</i> (CFG 3, Pos. 20)
	<i>"to be living in my family"</i> (OW2, Pos. 60)
	<i>"chilling with friends"</i> (V3, Pos. 75)
QoL-domain CIVIC ENGAGEMENT	<i>"To see the change that I make in the community, that makes me see where I'm going."</i> (E1, Pos. 76)
	<i>"But then the fact that we cannot always blame the government of the country satisfied me because we have to focus on life and we have to try by all means to live positively. So we are trying to live. If then it happens that you are unemployed and then you try by all means to get the job for the moment you don't work, then you don't just sit. I always try to be involved in the community activities, so that at least satisfies me."</i> (CFG4, Pos. 90)

Table 2 Selected quotations exemplifying the significance of employment status as well as education and skills for future life satisfaction (Annisa et al., 2025b)

Interview question: WHAT WOULD MAKE YOUR LIFE MORE SATISFYING IN THE NEXT 5 YEARS?	
(● = diminishing future satisfaction, ● = enhancing future satisfaction)	
QoL-domain EMPLOYMENT STATUS	“Having a job and being able to provide for my family? Yeah, that's the number one thing.” (V3, Pos. 97) “I want to open the homes for the children. That's my plan for the next five years.” (E1, Pos. 96) “I wish that I can build my own internet service somewhere, in the Eastern Cape, to go and implement what I've learned from V-NET. That is my goal.” (V1, Pos. 42)
QoL-domain EDUCATION AND SKILLS	“You see now as I'm busy pursuing my diploma, so I'm thinking of pursuing another course, project management. So with those qualifications, I'm seeing myself in one of the top management positions.” (E2, Pos. 34) “My graduation. All in blend, when I get this, then I will get even a better job. Then I'll start out to get a proper tenement, a general family. You see everything is going to be stable financially.” (OW5, Pos. 44)

tral aspects of eudaimonic well-being, including a sense of purpose, both individual and collective flourishing, and the cultivation of positive relationships (see Table 4).

These key elements were also closely linked to affective dimensions of well-being. Participation in the VPUU program and its associated case studies was widely regarded as enhancing happiness and satisfaction among participants. Positive emotions were most frequently associated with quality of life domains such as social connections, education and skills, environmental quality, and civic engagement (see Table 5). Conversely, negative emotions—particularly worry and anxiety—were most often connected to employment status and personal security, with crime exposure emphasized as a significant concern.

Perceived Impact of the VPUU Approach and the Embedded Case Studies on Material Conditions and Quality of Life Domains

Subsequent interview questions examined the influence of the VPUU program and its embedded case studies on a wide spectrum of quality of life domains. The findings

Table 3 Selected quotations exemplifying QoL domains most often mentioned in relation to personal achievements (Annisa et al., 2025b)

Interview question: HOW SATISFIED ARE YOU WITH WHAT YOU ARE ACHIEVING IN LIFE?	
(● = diminishing satisfaction with achievements, ● = enhancing satisfaction with achievements)	
QoL-domain SOCIAL CONNECTIONS	“My kid is the most important thing to me. So if I fail him, I fail myself. So seeing that I'm able now to give him whatever he wants and likes, I can do things for myself too.” (OW1, Pos. 17)
QoL-domain EMPLOYMENT STATUS	“I've decided to accept my position and where I am right now and having this position of being at VPUU helps me a lot because when I got here with my son, I wasn't even able to get something to eat at home.” (CFG 3, Pos. 42) “there's some stuff that I'm not satisfied. Okay. I think it's that issue of a job.” (OW2, Pos. 64)
QoL-domain EDUCATION AND SKILLS	“She recently got her driver's license, and I believe that's a life achievement right now. At the moment, she has not secured a job for her yet but she's trying to develop herself so that she stands a better chance of securing employment.” (V2, Pos. 126, translated) “I'm going to start my achievement at school, my matric (final high school exam) and then also my organization, the one that I told you about (community food garden). Yeah, those are the things that motivate me every day.” (CFG 1, Pos. 44)

Table 4 Selected quotations exemplifying eudaimonic dimensions expressed during the interviews and their relation to QoL domains (Annisa et al., 2025b)

Eudaimonic dimension	
Sense of purpose	<i>"I can see that the teenagers are not taking the right path, so I've decided to be the role model to the youth as I go. So, I'm giving back what I've got today." (V1, Pos. 70)</i> <i>"We are working like this because we want, as the leaders, we want this area to be a better area." (E4, Pos. 272)</i>
Individual and community flourishing	<i>"For me, it's a privilege to be here. Because when I came here, I noticed a lot of things and then I think it's because of what I've achieved here, not in a bad way, but there was no one who achieved what I've achieved here." (CFG1, Pos. 332)</i> <i>"VPUU has been a life changing moment for me. Major life changing moment. Most of the things I'm able to do now, it's because of VPUU. So my life was at a standstill, now it's slowly getting there." (OW1, Pos. 158)</i> <i>"Why I'm feeling proud of Monwabisi Park? Because it changes other people's lives and especially the kids because now they do have a playground where they can go after school and where they can be safe and they are not even paying fees, but they're here almost every day for free and I make sure that they don't go home hungry." (CFG 2, Pos. 308)</i>
Cultivating positive relationships	<i>"I feel grateful because before I was not involved in the project and I didn't know anyone here. But now because I'm involved, I know many people and I make a relationship with them. We build a relationship, beautiful relationship." (OW4, Pos. 64)</i>

show that the effects of the VPUU program and its co-produced social infrastructure are extensive and multifaceted, spanning all identified domains of quality of life. Interviewees particularly highlighted notable improvements in education and skills development, civic engagement, and the strengthening of social connections within the community. A deeper analysis of interview responses reveals significant interconnections among various quality of life domains, as detailed in Table 6. Many responses reflected overlapping aspects, indicating that improvements often benefit multiple domains simultaneously. This underscores the complex, multidimensional nature of quality of life in informal settlements, where advances in areas such as education can directly or indirectly enhance economic stability, social capital, and health.

Additionally, when assessing the "income and wealth" domain, it became clear that a more nuanced approach was needed. In recognition of the unique context of informal settlements, this domain was expanded to include "alternative means of reimbursement." This encompasses theft-resistant alternative currencies—such as vouchers or natural resources (e.g., food, compost)—used alongside or in place of conventional monetary reimbursements.

An analysis of the civic engagement domain—the central focus of this study—reveals that, although it relates to every domain in the analytical framework, its

Table 5 Selected quotations exemplifying affective dimensions expressed during the interviews (Annisa et al., 2025b)

Affective dimension	
Feeling happy and/or satisfied	<i>"I'm very happy. And why? I see there is more change. And myself, it always keeps me busy like tomorrow."</i> (OW3, Pos. 90) (ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY) <i>"Most of the time I just collect the children around. I just want to keep them in peace. Then after school I help them with the homework, then we go to the gym. They help me a lot to reduce stress, keep me happy all time. Just love kids."</i> (OW4, Pos. 34) (SOCIAL CONNECTION, EDUCATION AND SKILLS) <i>"This is how we're going to work when we get at the field. So that's when we get to create that connection. If you work together, like in sync, it's always a bonding situation because it is just enjoy working and you're doing it in sync."</i> (OW1, Pos. 78) (SOCIAL CONNECTION, EMPLOYMENT STATUS) <i>"They want my presence every time. That makes me very happy."</i> (V1, Pos. 200) (SOCIAL CONNECTION, EMPLOYMENT STATUS)
Feeling worried/scared	<i>"Mentally, job hunting is taking a toll on her."</i> (V2, Pos. 509, translated) (EMPLOYMENT STATUS) <i>"The crime is high. The alcohol abuse. And I feel stuck here in life."</i> (CFG 2, Pos. 94–96) (PERSONAL SECURITY, lack of EMPLOYMENT PERSPECTIVE)

most substantial connections are with education and skills, social connections, and personal security. These close links highlight how civic engagement and the aforementioned domains mutually reinforce one another, underscoring their collective significance in the community.

A detailed analysis of the survey results across key domains reveals that the VPUU program's framework functions as a vital platform for exchange. It facilitates education and skill development, creates opportunities for social interaction, and strengthens security through active community engagement, as illustrated by the quotations in Table 7.

Civic Engagement and Co-Production – Motivating and Enabling Aspects

Interviews explored participants' motivations for engaging in VPUU projects, as well as strategies to encourage broader community involvement in future co-production initiatives. Several key themes emerged: alongside structural aspects of hybrid governance—like enabling public support, equitable communication, and leadership development—participants highlighted the importance of short-term activating factors (such as awareness and information) and long-term stabilizing factors (such as placemaking), as detailed in Table 8.

Table 6 Selected quotations exemplifying the interrelations between QoL domains (Annisa et al., 2025b)

Domain	Quote	Related domains
Housing quality	<i>"Yeah, it did improve because the project (VPUU) would identify the houses that are affected and would come with some sort of assistance."</i> (E2, Pos. 266)	EDUCATION AND SKILLS, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT
Income and wealth	<i>"I do get cash - for example, when I worked for other organization, and I have my own organization. So yeah, it was impressing. And so also when you buy food for the other people or for older people, I used to take it out my pocket, but then were paid."</i> (CFG1, Pos. 490)	CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, SOCIAL CONNECTIONS
Alternative means of reimbursement	<i>"I came to VPUU applying for that social plan. Okay. So they didn't give you the money, they just give you the voucher to go and buy."</i> (E4, Pos. 216)	
Employment status	<i>"It helps hugely in the community in terms of employing the Change Makers, that money that they will be paid. They will go back to their homes and do the different things from putting food on the table to renew the structure. Yeah. So it helps. It makes the difference."</i> (CFG4, Pos. 850–851)	HOUSING QUALITY, INCOME AND WEALTH
Health status	<i>"Yes, (it improved) a lot because their children are protected to play with these rest food (waste). And the houses, they didn't have the flies and rats any more. Before this organic waste collection, we just threw the food. But now we use the buckets to control the rats."</i> (OW3, Pos. 118–119)	ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT
Education and skills	<i>"It's in their (VPUU's) papers to develop the skills for everyone. You understand. So they are giving a chance to each and every community member."</i> (V1, Pos. 313)	SOCIAL CONNECTIONS, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT
Civic engagement	<i>"VPUU manages to make our life a little bit easier. Somehow we tend to forget we are still living in an informal settlement because of these project that VPUU has brought into our community."</i> (E2, Pos 300)	ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY
Social connections	<i>"Experiencing a lot because when we are together, we're doing this, we get our views from each other and we share everything. We are like a family now. We've got new friends now that we don't know before. Oh, very nice."</i> (OW4, Pos. 313)	EDUCATION AND SKILLS
Environmental quality	<i>"If you have a garden around your own place, it helps with seeing the environment. We are breathing the air. So the plants you have are assisting in terms of purifying the air that you have to breathe. So that helps a lot health wise."</i> (CFG4, Pos. 896–897)	HEALTH STATUS
Personal security	<i>"Because if you are not connected to your neighbors, you can't feel comfortable walking around. You see? But when I came to my work here in VPUU (...), I feel safe because I know people who stay in this environment (...) Sometimes if maybe I'm needing something, I can go and borrow something from the neighbor, because you have to get used to associate with people each and every time."</i> (CFG5, Pos. 148–149)	SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Identification of Key Drivers Supporting Quality of Life and Well-being

Based on the results of the thematic analysis, this research identifies five key drivers of quality of life in South African informal settlements, grouped by their attributes: (1) eudaimonic (attributes: sense of purpose, fulfillment, personal growth, belonging), (2) altruistic (attributes: community flourishing, supporting others), (3)

Table 7 Selected quotations exemplifying QoL domains most often mentioned in relation to civic engagement (Annisa et al., 2025b)

Education and skills	“Monwabisi Park, it’s an informal settlement, but there’s a lot to learn in this. You learn things from the leadership, then things from VPUU. You learn things educational wise. VPUU used to bring the stakeholders to come and teach us some different things. So, I’m proud to say people of Monwabisi Park, they are well equipped in most of the things. Through VPUU.” (V1, Pos. 180)
Social connections	“ <i>Here, at SNAC, we are coming from all different organizations in the area of the community. So, we are sitting here to discuss the problems and how to be solved. How we can handle this and that, we are sitting in this hall. But no, it’s not about work. Our aim is to develop this area. The work business just came in as a bonus.</i> ” (E4, Pos. 276)
Personal security	“ <i>I think VPUU can promote the safety, these projects having a positive impact in the community. For instance, when they employ the Change Makers for programs that they have, you find that they will take some of the guys and some of the guys were involved in their own criminal activities, but when they get involved, they feel part of community. You just don’t look at the guy. You say, hey, he has changed a bit. I know some here were doing the wrong things. But some of them now are accompanying the ladies who are taking the children here to another ECD (early child care facility) over the hill.</i> ” (CFG 4, Pos. 912)

relational (attributes: trust, social capital, accountability), (4) formative (attributes: human capital, skill development, safety), and (5) material (attributes: economic opportunities and resources, improved physical and environmental conditions).

Eudaimonic Drivers of Well-Being

Eudaimonic drivers—such as purpose, fulfillment, growth, and belonging—emerged as strong motivators for both interviewees and VPUU staff. Their intrinsic motivation to improve community life, especially through co-produced social infrastructure, was reinforced by tangible successes. Fulfillment came from transforming challenging conditions, achieving personal goals, and seeing meaningful change, with projects like ECD facilities and community gardens strengthening both personal growth and a sense of belonging. These initiatives fostered shared achievement and reduced marginalization, enhancing community cohesion and individual well-being.

Altruistic Drivers of Well-Being

Eudaimonic and altruistic drivers were closely connected. Many interviewees engaged in co-production projects not only for personal fulfillment but also to support family, friends, and the broader community, especially vulnerable groups and younger generations. This altruism contributed both to individual satisfaction and to overall community development.

Relational Drivers of Well-Being

Relational drivers—especially social capital and trust—played a central role in improving quality of life. In the absence of strong public support, social infrastruc-

Table 8 Selected quotations exemplifying motivating and enabling aspects related to co-production within the VPUU context (Annisa et al., 2025b)

Civic engagement within co-production and governance: motivating and enabling aspects	
Activation and information	<i>"Workshops. Bringing them to workshops. Just to explain to, because some of them, maybe they don't know what is happening. But workshops, they can motivate them. And then involve someone that has been working or helped, someone that has experienced how things were in the past, but now they see the change. So these motivations, they can bring up more numbers."</i> (E1, Pos. 472)
Eye-level communication	<i>"It was a great experience because my opinions are always viewed as the important ones. So yeah, that makes me to be more involved. Yeah, because my opinions are respected and are valued."</i> (E2, Pos. 190) <i>"I'm trying to say we are connected within the community. VPUU don't just come with projects, it always consults the community."</i> (E2, Pos. 186)
Facilitating public support	<i>"I am more involved in the community in activities such as growing vegetables, initiating the community gardens. So I think that one day it will take me up because we're not only sitting there growing the spinach, we are trying to knock on the departmental doors like the Department of Agriculture, we are trying to knock there so that they can support us in terms of the community gardens. So having that hope of the door being opened one day, personally I have that hope that we can make it work."</i> <i>"And also VPUU helps us in our community, when you have, like me, I've got my soccer team. If I want to register my team, I must go and ask them to help me. If they help us, yes, they help us a lot. They do many things in our community. If you go there and tell them your story, they (VPUU) are willing to help us."</i> (OW4, Pos. 130)
Leadership development	<i>"It was my first time to lead people. It was not easy at first, but because we have got mentorship sessions and supervisors to teach how to lead these people, what are the challenges that we are going to face, how to handle the challenges, how to communicate with your team, how to delegate their work to them, everything that we are doing here. I thank VPUU because at the level that I am with the leading skills now, it's better than before."</i> (V1, Pos. 188)
Facilitating place-making strategies	<i>"But then I have to strive up and straightforward - that is why I get involved in the community activities. Not to be ashamed of my standard of living and not to have excuses or to blame anybody involving the government. Blaming the government because we say I stay here in Monwabisi Park because the government is not building the houses for me or is not doing the infrastructure. But then I get involved in the community activities such as the garden to make myself satisfied with my standard of living."</i> (CFG 4, Pos. 860)

ture projects fostered enduring connections among individuals, within the broader community, and with institutions. These networks extended beyond the projects, supporting mutual aid and information sharing. Community participation in VPUU and other local organizations helped mobilize others, expand communal bonds, and build advocacy skills. Access to resources and involvement in decision-making were enhanced through institutional partnerships. Trust—carefully built over time through positive shared experiences—emerged as a critical enabler of sustained community engagement and collective progress.

Formative Drivers of Well-Being

Formative drivers, such as skill development and human capital, were also vital. Community-level initiatives like SNAC leadership development enhanced collective capacity, while individual involvement in co-produced projects fostered professional

growth. Networking through these interventions spread information, heightened awareness of risks for vulnerable members, and contributed to a greater sense of security.

Material Drivers of Well-Being

Material drivers—especially economic opportunities—were frequently cited as crucial for well-being. Stable employment and improved living standards were highly desired, though the sustainability of jobs from the VPUU program was a concern due to their temporary nature. Still, the program supported business growth, particularly in the ECD sector and through food gardens, by providing skills development, digital access, and institutional support. Physical and environmental improvements, such as better sanitation, lighting, and waste management, also contributed to better health and a greater sense of security.

Discussion

Perception of Quality of Life and Well-being by the Participants

Quality of life in informal settlements is shaped by a complex mix of socioeconomic and social factors. Interview partners generally report moderate life satisfaction, though individual experiences vary widely. Notably, there seems to be a strong sense of optimism among interview participants, attributed to recent improvements achieved through the VPUU program.

Employment status emerges as the most influential factor affecting life satisfaction, underscoring the importance of economic stability, thereby confirming findings from earlier studies in informal settlement contexts (e.g. Richards et al., 2007). However, findings indicate that residents link employment not just to income, but also to broader opportunities—such as access to support structures and networks (social capital) and skill development (human capital)—which collectively enhance their quality of life. This is in line with findings from research on social capital in the context of informal traders, showing that social capital predicts well-being more accurately than income as it provides informal insurance in highly vulnerable conditions (Burger et al., 2026).

Social connections, especially with friends and family, are also vital to residents' well-being, highlighting the value of community cohesion and support networks. Accordingly, the findings of this study reinforce the importance of social connections and social capital, which have likewise been recognized as key contributors to well-being in informal settlement contexts throughout the Global South (see, e.g., Moser, 1998; Vertigans & Gibson, 2020; Mpanje et al., 2022; Burger et al., 2026). Additionally, self-efficacy gained through civic engagement plays a meaningful role; active participation in community activities boosts individuals' sense of agency and satisfaction. These findings align with previous research conducted in informal settlement contexts (see, e.g., Akbar & Edelenbos, 2020). Overall, the findings illustrate that

while economic factors are central, quality of life in informal settlements is deeply influenced by social relationships and opportunities for participation.

The Role of Governance and Placemaking in Facilitating Co-Produced Interventions

The Role of Hybrid Governance in Facilitating Co-Produced Interventions

The Monwabisi Park study shows VPUU's critical role in shaping hybrid governance. Acting as an intermediary between local government and the community, VPUU bridges gaps in resources and expertise, while equipping residents with skills for co-produced upgrades and fostering organizational cohesion. The Safe Node Area Committee (SNAC)—a body of elected local leaders—further strengthens governance by ensuring development aligns with community needs, regularly updating the Community Action Plan, and acting as a liaison between VPUU and residents.

Change Makers, recruited locally on short-term contracts, raise awareness, support projects, and share information, building trust and connecting community needs with VPUU expertise. Supported by supervisors and VPUU staff, they are pivotal in sustaining engagement. Over time, VPUU's role has shifted from direct management to a more facilitative, advisory position, empowering residents to take greater ownership. Strategic decisions, like securing funding, remain with VPUU due to its capacity to bridge the community with formal institutions.

This evolution toward hybrid governance combines grassroots participation with NGO support. Community members take on roles as SNAC members, Change Makers, supervisors, or volunteers—contributing to initiatives from early childhood education to waste management—strengthening local capacity and ownership. In summary, VPUU, SNAC, and Change Makers function as multi-level intermediaries, and the emergence of these non-formal structures indicates a needed shift toward a more decentralized and participatory governance model in Monwabisi Park. Particularly in contexts where institutional trust is low, these intermediaries help foster stability and reliability, creating a foundation for building institutional trust in public authorities. As other studies from these vulnerable contexts show, institutional trust can, in turn, lead to a higher assessment of one's own well-being (Burger et al., 2026). Overall, earlier empirical research in informal settlements provided evidence that well-being outcomes are influenced by the contextualized governance arrangements (te Lintelo et al., 2018). But whereas most studies highlight the role of local governance arrangements, they tend to focus solely on formal and informal service provision. As a result, they overlook the bridging potential of non-formal localized formats such as community action plans and the role of co-production, which moves communities beyond being passive target groups and involves them as active participants.

The Role of Placemaking in Facilitating Co-Produced Interventions

VPUU's placemaking approach functions as both a governance tool and a developmental framework. Site selection and project planning are done collaboratively with SNAC, ensuring meaningful community input. In projects like Emthonjeni,

the process involves not only SNAC but also the ECD Forum and nearby residents. While VPUU oversees technical design, all stakeholders help shape project briefs and outcomes.

Interestingly, the term “placemaking” is not explicitly used with residents, though its benefits—improved spaces, services, and opportunities—are widely recognized. Initially, VPUU led the placemaking process, gradually handing over mobilization and implementation to SNAC.

Placemaking in Monwabisi Park integrates physical improvements with social processes. It creates safe, accessible, and meaningful spaces, strengthening social ties and fostering a sense of ownership. Projects like food gardens, V-Net, and Emthonjeni promote education, skills development, and youth engagement, while shared spaces encourage collaboration and collective action. Overall, placemaking not only transforms the built environment but also strengthens well-being by fostering human, social, and economic capital. Accordingly, the co-production and placemaking strategy of the VPUU program aligns with the HSRC’s 2024 State of the Nation report, which emphasizes the importance of self-efficacy and agency in improving quality of life and well-being (Reddy et al., 2024). The findings also confirm earlier studies on the role of placemaking in informal settlements (e.g. Ley, 2019) and of co-design in informal settlements for well-being (Combrinck & Mulder, 2026). Whereas previous studies relate placemaking more to resilience of informal settlements and material well-being, the findings provide ample evidence of the eudaimonic dimension of well-being as the sense of purpose becomes an important factor.

The Reciprocal Influence Between Livelihood Capitals and Quality of Life Domains

This study underscores the important role co-production plays in enhancing quality of life, revealing a complex and reciprocal relationship between quality of life domains and livelihood capitals (human, social, natural, financial, and physical). These capitals both shape and are shaped by quality of life, with effects that can be direct and immediate or indirect and unfold over time. For instance, strengthening social networks through co-production can gradually improve education and skills, leading to better employment prospects. Figure 7 illustrates these dynamics using findings related to three key quality of life domains—employment, education and skills, and social connections—and their direct and indirect effects on livelihood capitals.

Employment Status Influencing Livelihood Capitals

Employment in VPUU projects provides immediate financial support, enabling families to access housing and achieve greater stability. Beyond these direct economic benefits, employment also builds confidence, encourages social participation, and creates lasting opportunities for skill development and entrepreneurship. While it primarily boosts economic capital, employment also enhances human and social capital, and supports improvements in housing and the environment. Thus, the benefits of employment extend well beyond income, empowering individuals and strengthening communities over time.

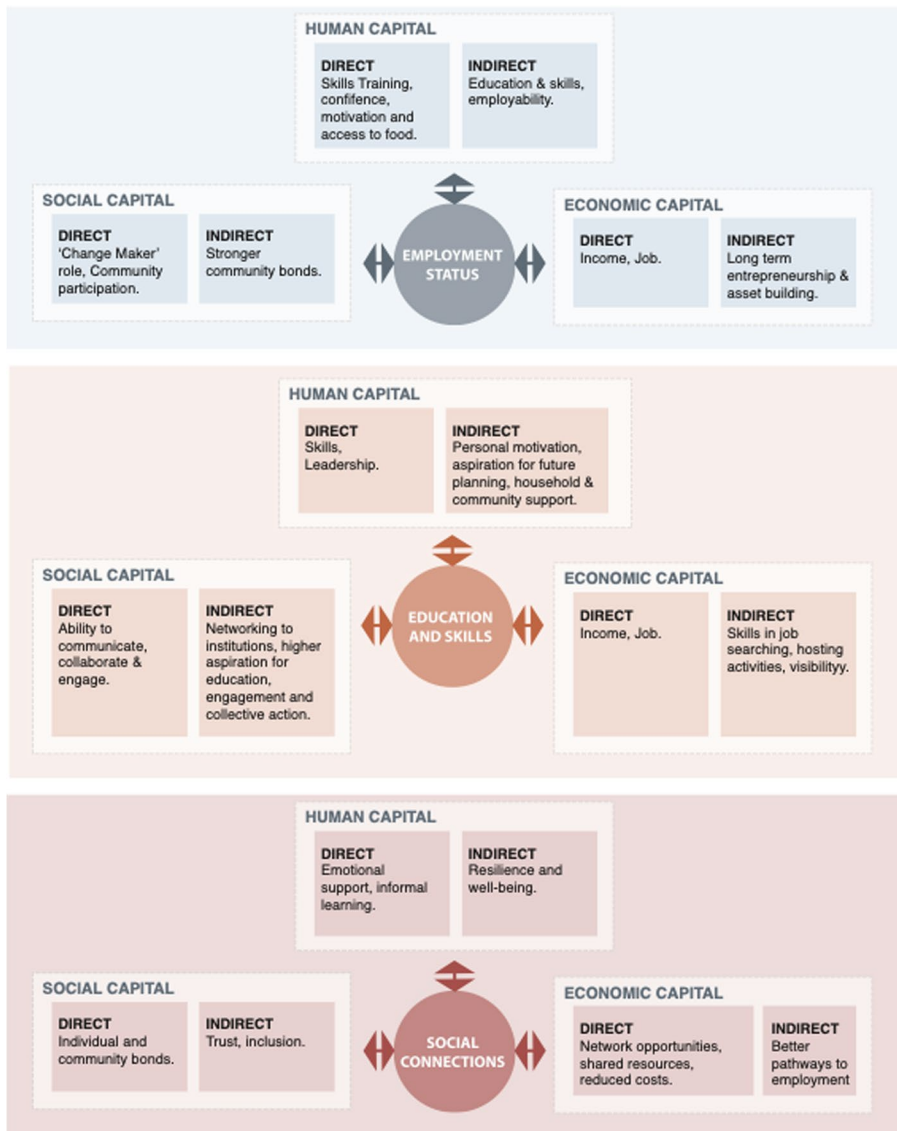


Fig. 7 Direct and indirect influence on livelihood capitals

Education and Skills Influencing Livelihood Capitals

Education and skills development directly provide individuals with qualifications and achievements, forming the foundation for personal growth. Over time, education also increases employability, financial stability, and community participation. While its primary influence is on human capital, education also strengthens economic capital through job opportunities, and social capital by promoting civic engagement. Ultimately, education is a catalyst for both personal and community advancement.

Social Connections Influencing Livelihood Capitals

Social connections are fundamental for family bonds, friendships, and collective action. They offer direct emotional support and a sense of belonging, while also indirectly boosting well-being, resilience, and civic engagement. Social ties support learning, participation, and trust-building within the community and with VPUU, strengthening social capital. They also contribute to human capital by fostering supportive networks, and to economic capital by enabling community-driven development. In sum, social connections are vital for individual fulfillment and community progress.

The Interplay between Eudaimonic, Altruistic, Relational, Formative, and Material Drivers of Quality of Life and Well-Being

This research identified that the various drivers of quality of life and well-being interact through interconnected, mutually reinforcing dynamics (see Fig. 8). Operating

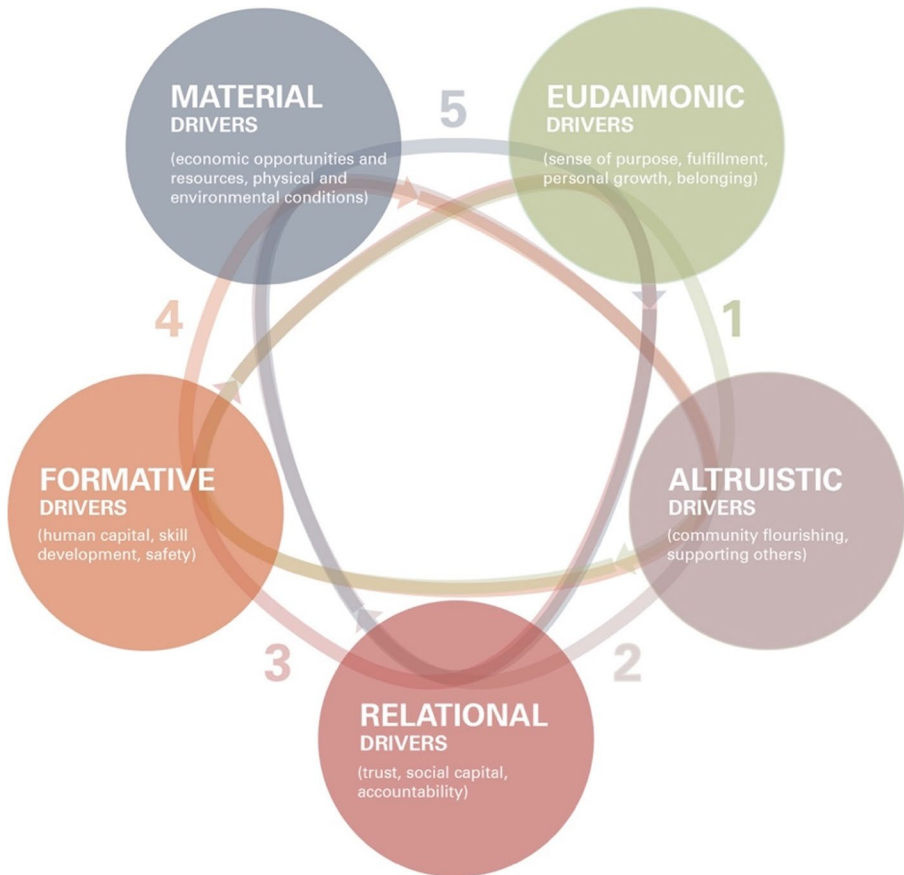


Fig. 8 Categories of key drivers and their reinforcing dynamics shaping quality of life and well-being

across multiple dimensions, these drivers collectively shape outcomes for both individuals and communities.

The interplay between eudaimonic, altruistic, and formative drivers is illustrated by how a sense of personal fulfillment inspired individuals to help others grow, which in turn initiated skill development (1). Furthermore, evidence from the case studies demonstrates that formative, material, and altruistic drivers are closely interconnected. Skill development enabled access to material resources, and when individuals and their families had sufficient resources, they were better able to share these—such as food, knowledge, or time—with other community members, fostering altruistic behavior (2). Additionally, altruistic, relational, and material drivers intersect as altruistic activities generate social interactions and foster positive relationships, which may, in turn, facilitate access to employment opportunities leading to material gains (3). Material, eudaimonic, and relational drivers interact in that employment can provide a sense of fulfillment and support social interactions, contributing to a wider network of relationships (4). Finally, relational, formative, and eudaimonic drivers are linked as diverse relationships create opportunities for skill development and foster a sense of belonging (5).

The evidence summarized in Sect. 5.3 and 5.4 highlights both the reciprocal influence between livelihood capitals and the interplay among diverse drivers of quality of life and well-being. These are significant findings: A more comprehensive evaluation of the multidimensional nature of dynamics provides valuable insights for assessing and supporting quality of life and well-being. What at first glance may be attributed to material conditions is, in reality, a more nuanced and complex interplay of other related drivers. This focused, small-scale analysis of relationships seeks to offer an original and pertinent contribution to the field of quality of life and well-being research.

Limitations of Co-Production, Placemaking, and Governance in Informal Settlement Contexts

Although the case studies yielded positive results, this research also revealed significant limitations regarding governance, placemaking, and co-production strategies. Intermediary organizations such as VPUU play a crucial role in facilitating engagement, coordinating stakeholders, and securing access to resources. However, their involvement may inadvertently generate dependency and, if not carefully embedded in local democratic processes, may restrict the evolution of robust, community-driven governance structures. While the VPUU approach is explicitly designed to foster community-based organization and make inclusive governance a core theme of development policy, the situation may differ in other, more project-oriented settings, which could limit the transferability of the findings of this study to other contexts.

Establishing locally rooted participatory processes also faces inherent challenges. Many community members are unable to participate fully—often due to the pressing demands of securing livelihoods and supporting their families—leading to uneven representation and engagement. Moreover, there is the challenge of establishing a

culture of willingness to take responsibility in participatory and co-productive processes. This, in turn, necessitates the acknowledgment that self-efficacy and agency can generate favorable outcomes—a recognition that needs to be strengthened by accumulating positive experiences over an extended period, as evidenced in Monwabisi Park. Consequently, the study's findings may be less applicable to contexts lacking such long-established experiences.

Furthermore, placemaking and co-production initiatives are susceptible to being appropriated or manipulated by influential stakeholders within the community. In such contexts, the presence of independent intermediaries is vital to ensure equitable and transparent resource allocation and decision-making. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the effectiveness of these intermediaries may be constrained by complex and sometimes conflicting local realities, which can limit their ability to fully support equitable outcomes.

Sustaining co-production processes presents additional difficulties. These strategies depend on continuous support and extended commitment, which are often hard to maintain beyond the duration of individual project cycles. The absence of consistent and reliable financial, institutional, and municipal backing can result in interventions losing momentum and community trust, thereby compromising their long-term impact. In structurally vulnerable environments facing multiple crises, institutional and municipal support is frequently limited—especially when disruptive events intensify existing vulnerabilities. These challenges further limit the transferability of this study's findings to other informal settlements experiencing even more severe crises.

The need for reliable support also extends to those providing it, such as non-profit intermediary organizations, which require stable financial resources to sustain their operations and commitment, typically sourced from a range of donors and funding programs. When this financial backing diminishes, the crucial role these intermediaries play in co-production, placemaking, and governance risks being undermined, limiting their ability to engage in these processes.

Finally, while co-production has the potential to mobilize local resources and capacities, the resources available within informal settlements are intrinsically limited. It is neither realistic nor equitable to expect community members and intermediary organizations to bear sole responsibility for all aspects of development, particularly regarding infrastructure provision—a responsibility that belongs to municipal authorities.

Recommendations

This study emphasizes the need to move beyond the material factors commonly analyzed in quality of life and well-being research. In South Africa's informal settlements, non-economic drivers—such as eudaimonic, altruistic, relational, and formative factors—are equally vital in shaping well-being. Policymakers at global, national, and municipal levels should acknowledge these dimensions as critical for advancing a more holistic and inclusive understanding, particularly in communities frequently marginalized from formal economic systems and marked by persistent informal-

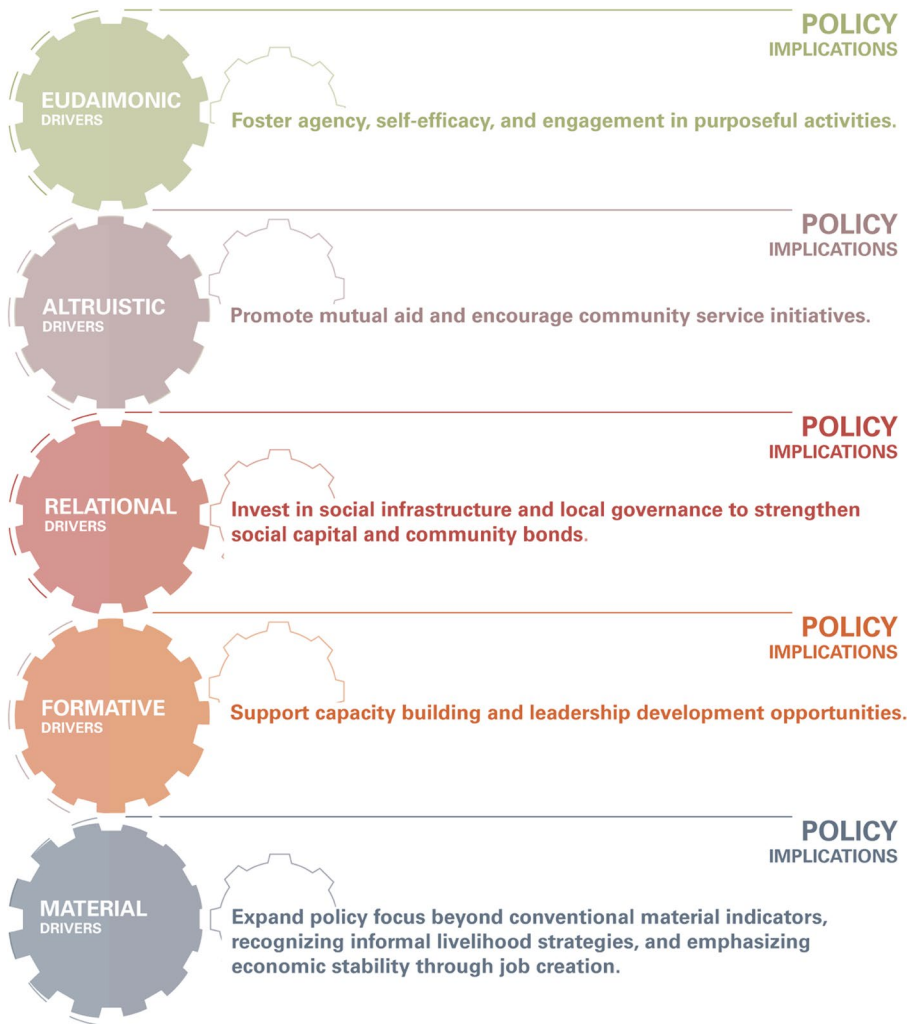


Fig. 9 Categories of key drivers and their policy implications

ity. Policy frameworks should explicitly integrate these drivers to foster community agency and service initiatives, mutual aid, local governance and capacity-building alongside economic initiatives (see Fig. 9). By addressing both economic and non-economic factors, more equitable and sustainable outcomes can be achieved.

Furthermore, this research aims to strengthen the promotion of non-economic drivers through the following recommendations:

Contextualizing Quality of Life and Well-Being Assessment

The primary motivation for the development of a context-specific analytical framework in this study was to identify factors that are locally significant in

shaping quality of life. Consequently, this study argues that researchers and experts should re-evaluate quality of life assessments in the Global South. The study advocates for a focus on contextually relevant dimensions – such as social capital and social infrastructure – as foundational elements of well-being in informal settlements. Furthermore, in contexts characterized by widespread informal economic activities, it is essential to extend beyond conventional indicators of monetary income and formal employment to encompass alternative livelihood strategies. Researchers and experts entrusted with quality of life assessment need to adopt this broader perspective to capture the complex and dynamic realities experienced within these communities.

Moreover, in order to attain a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between well-being and the specific challenges that an environment exerts, it is recommended that both researchers and development practitioners conduct localized studies, investigating the immediate effects of targeted interventions that are designed to mitigate challenges on the quality of life of individuals and communities who are directly impacted. Localized, context-specific studies help detect critical insights that may be overlooked in aggregated data analyses. Moreover, such studies enable the identification of effective, targeted strategies for improving well-being, as interventions can be tailored to the unique characteristics of each environment. If localized interventions are found to be effective, their relevance can be evaluated in other settings through systematic transferability assessments. Such an approach generates valuable insights into pathways for improving well-being across similar contexts. Importantly, bridging the persistent gap between well-being assessment and development practice in this manner would directly benefit affected populations, particularly the frequently overlooked and vulnerable communities residing in informal settlements.

Adopting a Holistic Perspective in Well-Being Assessment

Global, national, and local organizations responsible for assessing quality of life should adopt frameworks that recognize the interdependence of social, human, economic, physical, and natural capitals. To thoroughly evaluate the complex relationships and dynamics present in disadvantaged neighborhoods, this study advocates for the use of the Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF) and its five capitals (DFID, 1999). The SLF offers a systematic approach for connecting residents' everyday experiences of their built, social, and natural surroundings with the overarching context of vulnerability. By placing emphasis on individuals, households, and communities, the SLF prioritizes local perspectives and positions the five capitals—human, financial, physical, social, and natural—within the context of changing structures and processes.

This study further demonstrates the value of developing and applying an analytical model that integrates the SLF capitals with quality of life (QoL) domains, thereby supporting a holistic approach to understanding the interconnected evolution of livelihood capitals and QoL domains. On the one hand, the interdependence of the five capitals means that the impact of each cannot be fully understood in isolation; rather, these capitals exert both direct and indirect influences on one another. Conversely,

the study demonstrates that fluctuations in QoL domains exert a direct influence on livelihood capitals in both the short and long term. Consequently, the comprehensive impact on livelihood capitals is most effectively interpreted through the lens of QoL domains, which function as primary drivers of change.

Acknowledging and Supporting Hybrid Governance Schemes

This study highlights the critical function of intermediaries in bridging stakeholders, fostering communication, and linking local actors with higher-level governance institutions. The effectiveness of hybrid governance models depends on strong vertical integration across governance levels, facilitating collaborative decision-making and the alignment of policies from national to local contexts. Establishing co-production and hybrid governance structures requires ongoing, long-term engagement, as building trust is fundamental to development processes that unfold over extended periods. Interruptions to this continuity, such as the withdrawal of support, can impede progress and may even exacerbate challenges, as such actions are often perceived as disappointment or betrayal by communities.

Consequently, national and local governments must provide ongoing recognition, support, and investment in hybrid governance arrangements. It is important to consider not only immediate outcomes but also intricate, long-term effects. Support should go beyond short-term project cycles and basic financial assistance to include institutional backing, capacity-building, and acknowledgment of the complex and persistent efforts necessary for meaningful improvements in quality of life and well-being. This study affirms the importance of co-production and active community participation in enhancing quality of life within informal settlements. However, it also recognizes that addressing deeply entrenched structural challenges necessitates enduring solutions, facilitated by intermediaries, and additional resources. Thus, strengthening hybrid governance frameworks through strategic partnerships that provide lasting support and capacity is essential for achieving sustainable progress.

Finally, it is recommended that policymakers, municipal officials, community leaders, intermediary organizations, and researchers actively foster collaborative, reflective spaces that involve a broad range of residents. Such spaces are essential for assessing progress, aligning with broader discourses, and adapting programs effectively. These practices enrich governance and policy debates and support the scaling and transfer of successful approaches beyond the immediate context.

Conclusion

This research underscores that addressing the multifaceted challenges of informal settlements requires an integrated, context-sensitive approach. Here, quality of life and well-being research provides a more comprehensive understanding of how people experience life in informal settlements, beyond income, employment, and material conditions. In fact, achieving holistic improvements in quality of life and well-being depends on leveraging a broad spectrum of drivers—not only material conditions, but also interrelated formative, relational, altruistic, and eudaimonic dimensions. Within

this framework, co-production and placemaking emerge as effective strategies for mobilizing these multidimensional drivers, provided they are anchored within supportive governance structures.

Moreover, in resource-poor environments, it is essential to carefully consider both the planning and implementation processes of basic infrastructure. Such intentionality determines whether infrastructure can serve as micro-spaces of social interaction, thus functioning as social infrastructure that meaningfully supports various aspects of well-being. While co-produced social infrastructure has demonstrated positive impacts, the responsibility for improving quality of life should not fall exclusively on local communities. Sustained institutional commitment and comprehensive structural support are essential to ensure lasting progress.

Municipalities, in particular, need to adopt intersectional strategies that integrate physical infrastructure with the added value of social infrastructure, tailoring interventions to the nuanced needs of residents. These interventions must be locally grounded and jointly implemented, with the support of intermediaries where appropriate. However, intermediaries themselves require ongoing support and clearly defined accountability mechanisms, as their roles can be both enabling and, if poorly aligned, potentially disruptive to local governance structures.

Collectively, these insights point to the need for a fundamental shift away from traditional top-down, donor-recipient paradigms toward more reciprocal and collaborative forms of engagement. Ultimately, enhancing quality of life and well-being in informal settlements hinges on integrated strategies that balance community agency with enduring institutional partnership.

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Data Availability All data supporting the findings of this study are available within the paper.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of the University of Stuttgart, Germany (July 30th 2024/ AZ 24-037).

Informed of Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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