

“It shows the Ubuntu that our community members have”: Using PhotoVoice to conceptualise a ‘good’ life with adults in Mahikeng, rural South Africa

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Abstract: The capabilities approach, which defines a ‘good life’ as one where people are able to be and do what they value, has been widely used to inform multilateral and government policy globally. However, most capabilities studies have been carried out in high-income, urban settings. To explore the extent to which context and culture can affect perceptions of capabilities, we worked with adults in rural Mahikeng, South Africa. Participatory photography and group discussions were used to conceptualise a locally relevant ‘good life’. While our results largely support previous capability lists and measures we found that, in this context, personal capability cannot be considered in the absence of collective agency and responsibility, nor without access to nature and a healthy natural environment. This supports calls to incorporate collective and environmental values into capability measures to better align with Ubuntu values in African philosophy, such as interconnectedness and community, reflect the intrinsic value of environmental wellbeing, and address notions of intergenerational justice which are dependent on the environment and collective action.

Keywords: Capability approach, participatory research, Photovoice, communal wellbeing, Ubuntu, environmental wellbeing

Statements and Declarations

Ethical approval: Our study adhered to Declaration of Helsinki principles and received ethical approval from University College London (REC1305, 11 February 2020) and University of Pretoria (EDU102/20, 10 September 2021) ethics committees. All participants gave written informed consent before taking part in the study (22 September 2021), including informed consent for the publication of photographs they took for the study.

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INTRODUCTION

Measuring and improving well-being is a priority for many governments worldwide (Anand, 2021). Amartya Sen's capability approach has been influential in guiding this work for almost two decades. In the capability approach, well-being is conceptualised as the freedom and opportunity for people to be and do what they value – rather than a focus only on health, resources ownership or achievements (Cohen, 1990; Robeyns, 2003; Sen, 1999).

A core emphasis of the capability approach is public involvement in defining what constitutes valued beings and doings, or capabilities. Sen and others have argued that participatory approaches, enabling public reasoning and deliberation, are essential to align with the central principles of agency and democracy in the capability approach (Biggeri & Mehrotra, 2011; Robeyns, 2003; Sen, 2004, 2005). Participation becomes especially important when defining capabilities for policymaking, given that valued beings and doings differ across populations and contexts (Biggeri & Libanora, 2011; Robeyns, 2006).

Methods used to involve the public in the conceptualisation of capabilities have ranged from questionnaires (Biggeri & Libanora, 2011; Clark, 2003) to creative research methods involving extensive participation such as participatory photography, also known as PhotoVoice (Kellock & Lawthom, 2011). Creative participatory approaches like PhotoVoice are especially valuable in capturing the richness of lived experience and enabling co-production of knowledge (Hergenrather et al., 2009; Strack et al., 2004; Walker et al., 2022; Wang & Burris, 1997), yet remain underutilised in capability research (Sollis et al., 2022).

Despite the emphasis on using participatory methods to conceptualise locally relevant capabilities, the distribution of such research has been concentrated in high-income and urban settings. A recent review found that only a quarter of participatory well-being studies, which include capabilities research, were conducted in low- and middle-income countries (Sollis et al., 2022) – even though 80% of the global population resides in these countries (World Bank, 2024). In South Africa, to our knowledge, only one study has taken a general, population-wide approach to defining a capability list. Clark (2003) used an interviewer-administered questionnaire with 157 participants from an urban township and a rural village in the Western Cape, producing a list of 38 “functional capabilities.” Since then, other studies have developed capability lists in South Africa with public participation, although with a narrow sectoral focus, such as education (Walker, 2007; Wilson-Strydom, 2016) or environmental assessment (Simpson, 2018). Notably, no study has yet applied creative participatory methods like PhotoVoice to conceptualise capabilities more generally in the South African context. This is reflective of a global shortfall in the use of creative methods, which feature in only 14% of participatory well-being studies (Sollis et al., 2022).

In parallel to conceptualising capabilities, substantial progress has been made in developing capability measures, based on valued beings and doings defined with the public, for use in intervention evaluations and policymaking (Helter et al., 2020). However, capability measures developed in low- and middle-income countries remain limited. A recent review by (Helter et al., 2020) identified just one capability measure developed in a lower income setting – the Women's Capabilities Index from Malawi (Greco et al., 2018; Greco et al., 2015). In addition, the validity of widely used capability measures developed in high-income countries, such as the ICEpop CAPability measure for Adults (ICECAP-A) from the UK (Al-Janabi et al., 2012), is yet to be established in low- and middle-income settings.

Our study addresses key gaps in the literature by applying the capabilities approach using PhotoVoice with adults from rural communities across Mahikeng Municipality in the North West Province of South Africa. First, we expand on evidence conceptualising capabilities in South Africa by working with rural communities that have been previously understudied in wellbeing research (Koen & Robertson, 2021). Our study also contributes more widely to the global lack of evidence conceptualising capabilities in low- and middle-income countries, particularly in rural spaces. Second, by using PhotoVoice, a creative participatory method that captures participants' lived experiences, we generate findings that are rooted in people and places and are co-produced with participants. This enables us to draw key local insights about perceptions of capabilities, before comparing our findings with previously published capability lists and measures.

METHODS

Ethics statement

Our study adhered to Declaration of Helsinki principles and received ethical approval from University College London (REC1305, 11 February 2020) and University of Pretoria (EDU102/20, 10 September 2021) ethics committees. All participants gave written informed consent before taking part in the study (22 September 2021), including informed consent for the publication of photographs they took for the study.

Study context

This study was embedded within the Enabling Schools Project (University College London, 2025). The project aimed to investigate how cultivating a collaborative reading-for-enjoyment culture and strengthening the organisational and professional capacities of ten primary schools in Mahikeng Local Municipality, North West Province, could improve the learning and health of 6-9 year old children. The main town in the municipality is Mahikeng, near the Botswanan border, which emerged as an urban settlement under British Colonial rule and is now the capital of South Africa's North West Province. The town's economy consists mainly of retail in addition to being a centre for government, education and services (Munyati & Drummond, 2020; Munyati & Motholo, 2014). Outside of the town, 75% of the municipality is classified as rural and consists mainly of commercial farms and Tswana tribal land or villages (Mahikeng Local Municipality, 2022), alongside mining activities in the wider region. The predominant spoken home language (71.5%) is Setswana, which is the home language of 9% of South Africans (Department: Statistics South Africa, 2018). Compared with the rest of South Africa, Mahikeng Local Municipality has a similar percentage of people of working age (66% compared with 67% nationally), a higher percentage of people that are unemployed (36% compared with 30% nationally) and an average annual household income that is R20,000 (around USD 2700 at the time of the survey statistic) lower than the national average (Department: Statistics South Africa, 2011, 2022). The population is 97% Black African, which is higher than the rest of South Africa (81.0%) (Department: Statistics South Africa, 2022).

Sample

This study was carried out with former educational assistants from Mahikeng Local Municipality, who are members of the local community and acted as school and classroom assistants prior to this study. Former educational assistants were recruited to this study through 45 primary schools located in a district selected in collaboration with the national and provincial Departments of Education as indicative of wider South African rural barriers to education, including characteristics such as remoteness and a high number of schools in low socio-economic neighbourhoods (Quintile 1-3 schools). Selected schools were also

deemed well-managed by the provincial Department of Education. School principals were each invited to suggest one former educational assistant to participate in this study. A total of 45 former educational assistants were therefore invited to participate and 44 provided written informed consent.

After consenting to participate, eight participants withdrew during the course of the study primarily due to illness and study safety protocols that were in place for group discussions to adhere to Covid-19 restrictions at the time. In total, 36 former educational assistants therefore participated in the study from start to finish and produced data that could be discussed and analysed. Table 1 summarises key characteristics for the 36 participants. Most participants were female, which resulted in one male (n=11) focus group and three female groups (n=8-9). The average age of male and female participants was 26-28 years, 86% had a school-aged child in the household and over half lived in households where no adults were employed (n=20). The implications of the sample selection process are discussed in a later section on study limitations.

Table 1. Summary of participant characteristics (n=36)

Sex	
Female	25 (69%)
Male	11 (31%)
Average age	
Female	27.8 (min= 20, max= 36)
Male	26.2 (min= 19, max= 35)
Marital status	
Married	3 (8%)
Not married	33 (92%)
Education	
Any higher education	16 (44%)
Matriculation (completed high school)	20 (56%)
School-age children (7-15 years) in household attending school	
All are attending school	25 (69%)
At least one is not attending school	6 (17%)
N/A: No school-aged child in household	5 (14%)
Employment	
Salaried worker	1 (3%)
Occasional work (piece jobs)	4 (11%)
Student	4 (11%)
Unemployed but able to work	27 (75%)
Household employment status	
One or more adults are employed	16 (44%)
No adults in the household are employed	20 (56%)
Monthly household income, including grants, pensions, etc.	
R0-800	9 (25%)
R800-2500	12 (33%)
R2500-4500	8 (22%)
R4500 – 6000 and above	7 (19%)

Data collection

PhotoVoice and four focus group discussions based on photographs taken by participants were conducted between 22 September-18 October 2021. First, prospective participants attended an inception meeting in Mahikeng, during which the study was explained in detail, including how collected data would be used and the wider Enabling Schools Project. Written informed consent was sought for participation. Information and consent forms were explained to prospective participants in English and in Setswana, including their right to withdraw at any point during the study without any negative consequences. Two research assistants, conversant in Setswana and English, served as translators to navigate the briefing, consent and data collection processes. The research team gave each consenting participant a camera and showed them how to use it. Participants were then asked to take photographs over the following two weeks to capture whatever is important to them and that makes life 'good' or 'bad' – terms successfully used in South Africa (Clark, 2003) and elsewhere to denote wellbeing (Crivello et al., 2009; Greco et al., 2015). No examples of what makes life 'good' or 'bad' were provided. The research team emphasised PhotoVoice principles of participant agency, co-production and ownership of the process and data as well as ethical photography (Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). Rules were set on the circumstances in which participants could take photographs. For example, to ask permission from others before taking their photograph and to take photographs only if it is safe for them and others to do so (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001).

Second, participants independently used the cameras to capture whatever is important to them and what makes life good or bad. After two weeks, we met participants in Mahikeng to collect the cameras. A half day timeslot was made available to participants during which they could show up to hand back their cameras. We provided lunch and each participant was compensated with R100 (c.US\$10) in cash for their transport to Mahikeng and back. We developed the pictures stored in each camera, labelled with a participant number, and kept them in respectively labelled envelopes to give back to participants later during the workshop day that included focus group discussions.

Third, we met participants for a workshop and focus group discussion day and gave them their developed photographs. During this day, participants first worked individually to make posters by selecting ten photographs, based on their importance in life, from all of the photographs they took. Beside each photograph they wrote: (1) if it shows a 'good' or a 'bad' life, (2) a sentence describing the photograph or what is happening in it, and (3) what it is about the photograph that is important and shows a 'good' or a 'bad' life (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2014). Participants were divided into male and female groups. In their groups, through consensus, participants agreed on one photograph from each individual member's poster for inclusion in a group poster. These group poster photographs formed the focus group discussion guide. For each photograph, the member that owned it began the group discussion by stating whether it showed a 'good' or a 'bad' life, then describing the photograph and how it showed a 'good' or a 'bad' life. Once all group photographs were discussed, participants were asked about anything else they thought important for a 'good' or a 'bad' life. Groups were also asked an open ended question about the freedoms, opportunities and choices that they value most in life (Greco et al., 2015).

Researchers facilitated discussions using responsive questioning and consisted of early career and senior academic research staff from the University of Pretoria and University College London. All focus group discussions were in English, but participants switched freely to Setswana and helped one another translate into English for facilitators. Notes were taken during discussions, which were audio recorded. We provided lunch and refreshments and

each participant was compensated with R700 (c. US\$50) for all of their time on the study and transport costs incurred travelling to meetings.

Data analysis

All audio recordings of group discussions and participant text descriptions of photographs were transcribed verbatim, pseudo-anonymised and checked for quality by other team members at University College London and Pretoria. Transcribed data were then imported into QSR International Nvivo software for data coding and analysis. Imported data were labelled by focus group discussion group, enabling the comparison of views between female and male groups. Sen's capability approach was adopted as the framework for analysing the data and all codes related back to the concept of a 'good' or a 'bad' life. Guided by the research question, we carried out an inductive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six steps (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2022). Each of the transcripts, group and individual poster photographs and accompanying text descriptions were read and critically reviewed several times before a line-by-line coding of the text into open (descriptive) codes. Following an initial coding, open codes were developed iteratively and organised into similar code groupings, or axial codes. The codes were organised into an initial set of themes and sub-themes. GAJ then finalised themes and their interpretation, following discussion with JS, HHB and NB.

Reflexivity statement

Research design, data collection and analysis were led by GAJ. This study forms part of GAJ's PhD, which applies the capability approach to conceptualise a good life with adults and children in Mahikeng, South Africa. GAJ is a father and a British male researcher with a background in global health and economics, all of which had potential to introduce bias into the study. This was mitigated by working to co-produce data with participants, who were closely involved in the research. Participants generated the topics for discussion through photographs they took and participated in the analysis with written text after selecting individual photographs. Potential bias was further minimised by working closely with co-authors from South Africa who contributed substantially to operationalising the research design, data collection, notetaking during group discussions, a debrief with GAJ after data collection based on facilitator notes, and reviewing the final results and manuscript.

RESULTS

A total of 359 photographs, as one participant only took nine photographs, were selected by participants to include for analysis. A wide variety of photographs were taken, described in writing by participants and subsequently discussed in focus groups. There were similarities between photographs and group discussions and saturation was achieved for most themes or capabilities. From our analysis of participant text descriptions and verbatim transcripts of focus group discussions, we identified eleven main capabilities related to a 'good' life, summarised in Table 2 along with corresponding sub-themes. We made efforts to minimise overlap between themes, but this was inevitable due to the interconnected nature of capabilities. Each of the eleven capabilities is presented narratively below, supported by participant photographs and verbatim quotes, with a description of the capability, local enablers and barriers to its acquisition and links with other valued capabilities.

Table 2. Summary of themes/capabilities and sub-themes related to a good life

Themes/capabilities	Sub-themes
Wellbeing	– Mental wellbeing and having 'inner peace'

	– Physical wellbeing and being fit – Coping strategies – Absence of ill health through disease or injury – Access to health services
Learning and personal development	– Ability to learn and gain knowledge – Access to schooling – Access to higher education – Life skills and capacity to make healthy choices – Access to skills-based learning and apprenticeships
Economic security and basic needs	– Ability to meet basic needs and those of others – Assets – Ability to work or start a business and earn a salary
Safety and freedom from violence	– Communal-level violence – Household-level violence – Bodily integrity
Dignity and respect	– To be respected and to respect others – Freedom from harassment – Living with dignity
Agency and independence	– Ability to make own choices in life and form own opinions – Self-sufficiency and financial autonomy – Choice over pregnancy – Freedom of movement and access to services and shops
Enjoyment and relaxation	– Personal forms of enjoyment and relaxation – Social forms of enjoyment and relaxation
Voice and political representation	– Opportunities to be heard and initiate change – Confidence in leadership within government and public services – Involvement in politics and freedom to vote – Confidence in village leaders and tribal counsel
Belonging, family and social relations	– Ability to care for others and be cared for – Being part of a family and a sense of belonging – Ability to form close, open and supportive friendships – Ability to meet new people and socialise
Communal unity and identity	– Belonging to a supportive community that leaves no one behind – Helping others in the community and being a positive role model – Belonging to a strong community and knowing where you come from
Environmental wellbeing	– Access to a clean environment – Access to nature – Caring for animals and plants

Wellbeing

Wellbeing was consistently described as central to a good life and discussed among all groups, encompassing both physical and mental wellbeing, beyond merely the absence of disease or ill health.

“And you know what they say, health is wealth” (Group 1, male)

Economic security and the ability to meet basic needs were described as foundational for wellbeing, as also outlined further below. Unemployment and a lack of opportunities emerged as major stressors of wellbeing in both female and male groups, with participants highlighting the need for coping strategies.

“And I think since South Africa has high unemployment rate, so many young people are using alcohol for wrong reasons. For example, they are using alcohol for stress relief. That’s very bad.” (Group 1, male)

Coping strategies were a recurring topic across groups. While some coping strategies were positive, others were described as negatively impacting on wellbeing. Alcohol and substance abuse emerged as common coping strategies for unemployment and poor living conditions, impacting negatively on physical and mental health in addition to links with other capabilities (Figure 1) such as safety and violence, interpersonal relations, and a lack of agency due to unplanned pregnancy. These links are discussed within other capabilities presented below.



Figure 1. Participant 21 (female): *“Bad life. Alcohol is not good. It can make a person do violent things to your family. Alcohol can get a person sick, e.g. maybe a person suffer from kidney diseases. People who drink alcohol usually lose everything like their wife, houses and cars. They sell their property to get alcohol. They spend all of their salary in alcohol. They don’t even think to buy groceries.”*

In contrast, personal choices, or agency, a sense of purpose, belonging and having ‘inner peace’ and being happy were seen as enabling positive coping strategies despite wider stressors in life such as economic insecurity or unemployment.

“Whether it's unemployment, or you don't have enough money to sustain yourself, but it's always good to say, despite of everything that's going on: I am happy.” (Group 3, female)

Sports and exercise were valued as particularly beneficial coping strategies, promoting both mental and physical wellbeing.

“Exercising is also good for life because, that's the first thing is refreshing and it keeps you motivated. It has lot of benefits on our physical and on our mental health.” (Group 3, female)

Environmental factors also shaped wellbeing, with participants stating the advantages of being in rural areas for physical wellbeing. This was due to the land available for gardens and livestock that provide easy access to fresh vegetables and meat, thus supporting a healthy diet which was valued by participants. However, some also spoke of food in relation to hunger and unhealthy dietary choices.

“I think working out on its own it helps because the amount of, the type of food that we eat is not that healthy. So imagine if you are eating bad foods, you are eating fats, you are drinking so much alcohol and you are not working out.” (Group 1, male)

Both men and women valued having health services close by for promoting good health and caring for illness and injury.

“In our community we have a 24/7 operating clinic. So it is good because if when we come seek any time, we just rush to the clinic without worrying about transport.” (Group 3, female)

Women in particular described the negative impact that HIV/AIDS, pregnancy at a young age, road accidents and unsafe sanitation have on health in their communities. Health services were described as providing vaccinations, reproductive health, family planning and preventive sexual health services.

“They [Department of Health caregivers] are providing the young people with information, sometimes they give session on how they should prevent themselves from getting the pandemic, yeah, HIV/AIDS and all those stuff. They also sometimes bring a nurse to come and provide for them the prevention [contraceptives]” (Group 2, female)

However, sexual health education in schools was deemed insufficient by some women given high rates of sexually transmitted infections and the impacts of unplanned pregnancies at a young age, which are discussed under the agency and independence capability below.

“I think schools should make sure, or should increase the education about going to the clinics, getting some condoms, or contraceptives, and then giving them more education about being pregnant while you're at school.” (Group 4, female)

Learning and personal development

All groups viewed learning and personal development as inseparable from a good life.

“It plays a major role because without education you are nothing.” (Group 1, male)

“I think education plays the most important part in our lives.” (Group 3, female)

Participants described learning and personal development across a broad set of opportunities and activities, including formal academic (e.g. schooling, higher education), skills-based (e.g. apprenticeships, employment) and informal learning (e.g. daily activities, intergenerational learning).

“I think the fact that we are able to plant things, it also plays a role in agriculture. Like that's an educational activity for everyone. It's not something that you need to go sit down, study, and you can actually learn by looking, you can learn by being given instructions or yah, observation.” (Group 4, female)

Free primary schooling and access to higher education through government financial support were valued by all groups. In contrast, participants highlighted the previous negative impact of domestic work and restricted access to higher education during Apartheid and of primary school fees post-Apartheid.

“Five years ago most of the school they were paying school fees. And then most of the children were stayed at home because parents can't afford the school fees. Now it's a free education. Every child have the right to go to school, and then get better education.” (Group 3, female)

Alongside government support for education, electronic mediums of communication, primarily access to internet, were seen as essential for higher education, connectedness and the potential for learning more broadly.

“Nowadays we use everything or we learn everything from the internet. A lack of internet it's a problem because you'll be having a phone and it's not working because there's no network. You want to research and then you can't because there's no network.” (Group 4, female)

While education was seen as a pathway to work, all groups described how the benefits of formal education from high school onwards are limited by a lack of employment opportunities in their communities and South Africa more widely – leading some younger people to attach less value to formal education and seek opportunities for employment instead.

“[...] Going to work in farms because they say what school can do for us? Some they just graduated, like you just read from university, and she's just staying home like us, so it's better we can just go and work at our age now, we don't need education for us to work.” (Group 2, female)

Accordingly, many participants highlighted the importance of skills-based vocational training (e.g. computer coding, brick plant apprenticeships), sporting and arts-based opportunities, which they viewed as essential to meet the various needs of people in their communities.

“So showcasing talent is very important because we know that others than us are not given academically, they are not given. But a lot of emphasis is put on the academic side of career and all that, whereas they neglect their talent side.” (Group 1, male)

Developing the ability to learn and the process of gaining knowledge were described as ‘empowering’ and valued as a way of thinking and living.

“Whether you're gonna find a job in an office or a garden, you need to express yourself in order to tell that person what you want and what you want exchanged back into what you're doing. So education is the little knowledge of knowing your ABCs, irrespective of a degree or a Matric, but being able to express yourself and gaining knowledge from what you hear from people and what you see in your community.” (Group 3, female)

Viewed in this way, the capacity to learn and develop were valued as assets in themselves that cannot be stolen and that expand the choices and opportunities available to people in life.

“Ok and then education is something that no one can steal it for you.” (Group 3, female)

Schooling and higher education, in particular, were linked with expanding other capabilities such as economic security (e.g. through improved employability and income), household and family wellbeing (e.g. by meeting participant basic needs and those of others), personal wellbeing (e.g. through life skills and health education), social relations (e.g. through exposure to new perspectives and opportunities), voice and self-expression (e.g. communication skills), agency and independence (e.g. through financial security) – thus enabling people to become what they want to be in life (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Participant 12 (male): *“Good. Seeing kids reading and going to school 7 days a week is a happy moment cos that show that our village is building the future of our people.”*

“With the freedom of education, learners have to learn and acquire new basic skills which they can make living out of. So education is giving them an opportunity to become who they're supposed to be. It also has to empower them, of what they're supposed to be in life.” (Group 2, female)

In addition to personal benefits, schooling and higher education were also valued for their societal impact. Specifically, by teaching life skills and creating ‘better citizens’ who are able to make the ‘right’ decisions for personal and societal wellbeing (discussed in ‘dignity and respect’ below), and by enabling essential and respected jobs such as teachers and doctors.

“We have, education produces doctors, engineers, lawyers, people who make our life.”
(Group 1, male)

Economic security and basic needs

Economic security was considered central for a good life across groups and described primarily by participants as the ability to meet their needs and those they care for. Basic needs were defined as water, food, housing, electricity and fuel sources, and clothing. Participant discussions of economic security centred on the ability not only to meet personal needs but also those of a household, family or persons under their care.

“Being able to put food on the table for your family is good life.” (Group 2, female)

“Growing your own vegetable also you can be able to have some income because you gonna sell other vegetables to make money and others you can share with the whole family.”
(Group 3, female)

Assets such as land and livestock were valued for providing economic security. Both male and female groups described how, unlike in urban areas, rural spaces provide vast areas of affordable land for housing and food production. Many participants highlighted the importance of private and communal (e.g. village or school) vegetable gardens that feed households and the wider community (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Participant 34 (male): *“Good thing. The picture shows the good thing because the garden provide the members of community and school with vegetables.”*

Rearing livestock was also valued, which both female and male groups discussed as a key source of food, wealth and consequently protection against shocks and poverty in the community given that they can be sold when times are tough. Surplus wealth and money, were typically not valued in and of themselves, rather as a means of meeting needs and helping others.

“We have freedom in villages of land. We don't pay rents, we eat from our gardens, we eat from our livestock, we actually have freedom to use less money.” (Group 1, male)

Along with assets, all groups valued being able to work. Participants spoke of employment as important for meeting their basic needs and those they support and for mental wellbeing.

“A sense of unemployment is part of a bad life because one does not have much to provide for themselves or their family. It also takes away the sense of purpose.” (Group 2, female)

While both female and male groups valued being employed, female groups emphasised the importance of self-employment and of creating opportunities or businesses through personal drive.

“Yeah. To me this picture [‘Kota’ street food stall started by another participant] it encourage us that we cannot rely on getting the jobs from the government, we can also create something for ourself. We can also hustle and do something.” (Group 4, female)

This was in large part for financial autonomy, which is discussed further under agency and independence, and the need to provide for others under their care in a context of high unemployment and family fragmentation.

“And I respect my hustle very much because when I look at my hustle I see self-provision. I mean with the little profit that I get, I’m able to provide for myself and my son.” (Group 4, female)

Participants also spoke of the impact of employment at a communal level. Employment was described as improving social cohesion by lowering crime, which is closely linked with violence.

“[...] And it [communal pig project] lowers the rate of unemployment in our village, so crime rate it also decreased because some of the youth will have jobs.” (Group 3, female)

Overall, however, economic insecurity was described as widespread and linked with many other capabilities valued by participants, including wellbeing, education, safety and freedom from violence, agency and independence, and dignity and respect. In addition to unemployment, participant discussions often centred on the lack of water, housing and electricity. Water was commonly mentioned by all groups given the scarcity of municipal water and clean sources for human and livestock consumption.

“It simply says: we in Mafikeng lack water.” (Group 1, Male)

Women spoke about the long distance and time-consuming process of obtaining clean water (discretionary time), the availability of water for livestock consumption, for maintaining vegetable gardens, the prevalence of unsafe water causing illness, and the impact of water scarcity on children who often have to help.

“It is mostly the children, the school learners that go to hustle out for water. [...] And you’ll find them carrying such big baggage for their age, maybe a 20 litre, and a child is like five years old.” (Group 4, Female)

Homelessness and a lack of housing, including insufficient provision of Reconstruction and Development Programme houses by the government, were also widely discussed. Participants commonly spoke of overcrowding and the negative impact of shacks and traditional housing structures such as mud houses on health and wellbeing.

“Imagine if you were 15 in a shack, so there is a small space for you to put your things and the worst part if they have kids. So you know kids are naughty, they can throw things around and that can lead to a bad life.” (Group 1, Male)

“And from my experience, a mud house during heavy rains, it falls. It is very dangerous.” (Group 2, Female)

Some participants, however, noted that shacks and traditional housing provided shelter, a means to raise a family and a sense of belonging required for mental wellbeing, while simultaneously working on building a more solid structure.

“I grew up in a shack. However, in the same how do you call it? In the same yard we managed to build a house, but then maybe because I was a lil’ kid, I wasn’t bothered that I stayed in a shack. I just saw, oh there’s where I stay, I know I’m gonna find my brothers and sisters, that’s my home. Not strong, but there’s a house, hmm hmm, there’s my house.” (Group 1, Male)

Along with water and housing, participants also spoke of challenges with electricity for household activities. Interrupted electricity supplies and blackouts, or load shedding, was highlighted as impacting negatively on personal and family wellbeing across groups.

“I took it as whereby there’s no electricity at home. Then you have to make fire to cook outside. For me I feel as if it’s not safe, because you have to make fire and you know kids, they’ll just come there and play with fire and then they’ll get burned” (Group 4, female)

Safety and freedom from violence

All groups valued safety and freedom from violence. Violence was described as highly prevalent, especially in a rural context, occurring in both households (e.g. domestic violence) and communities (e.g. rape or murder).

“Crime is so high at the rural areas. The rural areas are not safe at all. They are not safe. Children get raped, people get murdered, people get mugged on the street.” (Group 4, female)

Several types of violence were discussed across groups. Commonly mentioned types of violence included gender-based and sexual violence, robbery, kidnappings, interpersonal physical violence and abuse or violence towards vulnerable groups such as children or the elderly.

“And also, old-age homes is good for life too. Because our grandparents are being abused at home. Some they don't have caretakers.” (Group 3, female)

All groups identified alcohol and substance abuse, linked with unemployment and economic insecurity, as the main driver of crime and violence in households and their communities.

“If I may add on, we all know all these gender-based violences and rapes and car crashes, and you can name them all, the common denominator is alcohol.” (Group 1, male)

Across groups, participants spoke of how violence affects multiple aspects of life such as wellbeing, agency and independence. Gender-based and sexual violence, rape in particular, were commonly mentioned as a problem and linked with unplanned pregnancy at a young age (discussed under agency).

“They [young women and girls] get raped, it's [pregnancy] unplanned. So it's a bad thing. It shows a bad thing.” (Group 4, female)

In addition, violence restricted freedom of movement in the community and some males described violence as a barrier to keeping fit, restricting possibilities for exercise to the home or gyms given fears of exercising outdoors.

“I don't know, you've seen it on TV, people just jog freely, nicely, but then you can't expect me to jog in Setlopo at night or early hours of the morning. Ahh ahhhh. That's like calling trouble away, like come here trouble, come attack me.” (Group 1, male)

All forms of violence were closely linked with dignity and respect. Perpetrators of crime and violence lack respect in the community and are ‘cast-out’ as a result of their actions (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Participant 39 (female): *“Crime and violence is of a bad life because it does not solve anything and leads to jail time or ending up being a cast-out in the community.”*

In turn, violence often violates the bodily integrity of victims, which is central to both agency and living with dignity. Female groups primarily spoke of physical and sexual violence as affecting bodily integrity, while male groups focused on bodily integrity in relation to their ability to decide whether to get vaccinated in light of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic at the time.

“I would value the choice to decide on my body, what goes into my body and what goes not into my body, like this issue of the vaccine.” (Group 1, male)

Dignity and respect

Male and female participants emphasised the importance of dignity and respect for a good life. Being respected and enjoying freedom from harassment regardless of race, gender, sexuality and religious beliefs were all mentioned. Dignity and respect were discussed in terms of acceptance of a person’s identity within the community and society and in relation to access to equivalent opportunities.

“The society that we live in, we are judging, and I will try to live the life that I’m not. If I’m gay, I will pretend as if I’m not gay, you’re sad, I know that it is not me.” (Group 2, female)

Many participants spoke of respect as being earned in the community, primarily due to the contribution made by a given person. Participants stated respect for those who help their families, communities and serve as positive role models and leaders. Work in areas such as education, healthcare, and community volunteering or programmes was respected (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Participant 9 (male): *“Good life. Talent search for youth. Good life because it shows us youth are developed and want to showcase their talent and reveal other’s talent.”*

“And it also signifies I’d say respect, because the person who came up with this initiative [communal talent show for young people] will definitely be respected in the community. I also see leadership skills here. I see a leader here or leaders.” (Group 1, male)

Living with dignity was seen by some participants as linked with poverty and associated living conditions. Financial status was not in itself seen as reducing a person's dignity or respect, rather the need to endure certain conditions such as homelessness, a lack of clothing, poor sanitation, and abuse or a lack of care when in a vulnerable state (e.g. elderly or disabled).

“Yes, this is what we call a pit toilet, which represents a bad life. We can fall back on the service delivery and everything, but what stood out for me mostly was what dignity it gives the person using it.” (Group 2 female)

However, participants in the male group did highlight the elevated status in the community that can accompany wealth – the ownership of cows in particular. For example, traditionally to enable marriage through ‘Lobola’, or bridewealth, and for cow skins over the coffins of village chiefs during burials.

“As I was saying back in the days if you were to pay Lobola to the woman of your dreams, instead of paying money right now, they could tell you maybe they want a 10 cows or 5 depending on how good your uncles will negotiate” (Group 1, male)

Other male and female participants also spoke of personal dignity, despite external factors, as a function of making the ‘right’ decisions and behaving positively – for which religion, being happy and education were enabling factors. For example, choosing not to engage with sugar-daddies despite peer-pressure (e.g. in agency and independence below) or choosing not to litter and in some cases actively recycling (e.g. in environmental wellbeing below).

“This represent bad life because it is inappropriate way of getting rid of waste by burning them.” (Group 2, female)

Agency and independence

All groups valued the freedom to form their own opinions and make choices independently in their lives, including examples such as career choices and freedom of movement.

“Pursuing your career is part of good life because you will be able to afford everything you want.” (Group 2, female)

Women commonly stressed the importance of choices over pregnancy. Unplanned pregnancy at a young age was described as prevalent and negatively impacting on key areas in life such as physical wellbeing, learning and development, economic security, and family structure.

“To be pregnant when you are young is very bad because you can't focus at school and be a mother at the same time. So most of the youngest, they are unemployed because they dropped out at school because of pregnancy. So it's very bad.” (Group 4, female)

Women also valued financial autonomy (Figure 6), which was often linked with providing for others, and the ability to decide how they spend their money.



Figure 6. Participant 13 (female): *“Good. Because I get to benefit from my kota hustle [selling sandwiches called ‘Kota’ or ‘Quarter’]. Without it I wouldn’t be able to provide for my son.”*

“And choices on how to use that money when I got it, yes, I do have a choice on how to use that money. Yah.” (Group 3, female)

In female groups, avoiding a need to rely on others through economic security was closely linked with dignity and respect, given that security expanded choices available to women and awarded them more freedom to make the ‘right’ ones. This is reflective of family fragmentation and restrictions on female agency within households, in large part due to high rates of alcohol abuse and violence.

“But I was happy because I was doing me and I was being independent. Not depending on other people to give me whatever that I want and I will have to repay that person. Maybe like joining sugar daddies like I said, so I choose where is the odd job, where is whatever, anything that satisfies me.” (Group 2, female)

All groups also described how rural spaces can improve their freedoms and ability to make choices through access to land. This was not perceived to be possible in urban spaces.

“And it’s very nice because it is our choices to do something in our villages, like to do gardening, and you can build a crèche for our children in the villages. So no one can tell you to move there and go there, don’t go there, and do this. So it’s very peaceful.” (Group 4, female)

Most groups, however, spoke of the constraints imposed on their choices and independence due to difficulties in accessing shops, clinics, schools and other places or services that are important to them. While distance was perceived as a problem, most participants spoke of poor roads and insufficient public transportation as key causes of travel times and a lack of mobility. Poor roads were also described as causing road accidents and acting as hotspots for crime and violence, including kidnappings and rape.

“This picture [dirt road] is showing a bad life because we are far from most of things and it takes time for us to reach opportunities.” (Group 4, female)

Restricted freedom of movement was also discussed by some in the male and female groups in relation to Apartheid rule due to the requirement of identification cards among black populations.

“We know, black people were not allowed to just walk on their streets without carrying their own IDs. So today, we have a freedom of movement.” (Group 1, male)

Overall, it is important to note that the expansion or contraction of agency and independence was dependent on almost every other capability identified, including learning and development (e.g. reading and writing), economic security (e.g. employment), freedom from violence, household and family wellbeing (e.g. alcohol or substance abuse), communal unity and identity (e.g. collective action and projects), social relations (e.g. negative peer pressure), voice and political representations (e.g. rights as a citizen) and environmental wellbeing (e.g. clean environment).

Enjoyment and relaxation

Female and male participants valued the ability to have time for themselves and for entertainment and relaxation. Discretionary time, entertainment and relaxation were valued in and of themselves but also for their link with mental wellbeing.

“Even churchgoers also need entertainment. So I think it's a good thing because it helps the mind to relax.” (Group 3, female)

Personal forms of entertainment such as watching television soaps were mentioned by some participants. However, entertainment was more often described as socialising with other people, including opportunities to reunite with family living far away during celebrations (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Participant 29 (female): *“Good life. Celebrations are good because you get to meet with family member who stay far from you and have fun.”*

Community spaces and land for activities such as sports or celebrations, pubs or clubs, and fast food places or restaurants all provided opportunities for entertainment with other people.

“When I see this picture, I see refreshment. Because she’ll be selling Kotas whereby, when you don’t want to cook, when you feel like ah today I just want to be lazy day and go out and see people, get fresh air, you might just go to that place and buy a quarter instead of cooking.” (Group 4, female)

However, opportunities for entertainment perceived as positive by participants, such as sports or cultural groups, were commonly limited. The lack of activities available to community members was seen by women as causing people to abuse alcohol and other substances for entertainment.

“There is no soccer, there is no netball, nothing. The entertainment in my community is only going to the pubs and taverns.” (Group 2, female)

Many male participants spoke negatively of alcohol abuse, but alcohol was described by some men as a means of facilitating socialising.

“That’s one thing about alcohol, it will give me the audacity, it will give you the nerve to say whatever you wanted to say. But when you are sober, you know there are people who pretend to be reserved.” (Group 1, male)

Alcohol was also seen as part of relaxing and entertainment during spare personal time.

“I am a sport fanatic, so after a long week of waking up early, weekend is time I want to drink a few beers and watch football.” (Group 1, male)

Voice and political representation

Opportunities to be heard and having a say in decision-making was valued across groups. Speaking out when there are problems was seen as crucial for improving communities and public services.

“If you see something is wrong you have to raise your voice so that you can fix it. If you keep quiet nothing will be fine.” (Group 3, female)

However, participants spoke of the lack of opportunities available for their views to be heard, to influence decision-making and initiate solutions in their communities.

“There is a lot I like to change about my community, it’s just that it’s not in my hands to change those things.” (Group 2, female)

Governmental decisions and services were not seen as meeting community needs and were perceived as corrupt and unfair by participants.

“PR: But the state of economy also comes from the corruption. Stealing of the funds.”
(Group 2, female)

Wastage in a context of scarcity exacerbated feelings of unfairness and a lack of trust and confidence in leadership within government and public services. Examples included leaking communal taps in a context of water scarcity, school chairs and tables left outdoor in the rain despite a lack of these in classrooms, and vacant buildings misused for crime despite the need for opportunities and spaces for people to start businesses and host communal or indigenous events.

“It makes life bad because the children don't have enough chair. And this one are broken [because left outdoors/incorrectly stored].” (Group 1, male)

In contrast to government, communal levels of leadership were described as more effective and representative. For example, village leaders and tribal counsels were viewed by participants from two of the four groups as providing *“good leadership, harmony and equality at our village”* (Group 4, female). Knowing village leaders was described as enabling opportunities for accessing land, building houses and businesses.

“Each and every village have like a king and if you are living within the village, if maybe you know, most of the time they know each other, so it will be easier for you to get a space where you can actually build something like crèche for example, or a house, or apply it for RDP [Reconstruction and Development Programme] house.” (Group 4, female)

Poor public decision-making and services were described as affecting every other capability in our study. For example, personal and environmental wellbeing affected by a lack of municipal rubbish collection, economic security due to a lack of jobs, and family wellbeing due to a lack of housing. Despite the stated lack of trust in government and inefficiencies in service provision, being politically active and having the freedom to vote were highly valued by all groups, viewing these as central to improving service delivery and lives in their communities (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Participant 45 (female): “[Political poster]. It's a bad life for the community to participate only during elections where there is no service delivery.”

Belonging, family and social relations

All groups mentioned belonging as important for a good life. Alongside communal belonging, discussed further below, participants described belonging as being derived from caring relations with family and friends. In other words, caring for others and being cared for. Male participants viewed family as key to a sense of belonging (Figure 11) and stating: *“Home is where the mother is”* (Group 1, male).

“For me family is most important thing in my life because it give me sense of belonging and is also a safe space for me when the world is cold.” (Group 1, male)

Without family, male participants did not perceive *houses* to be *homes*:

“He talked about structure, the picture of a shack, without family it’s not a home.” (Group 1, male)

Both female and male groups mentioned the importance of a good home and family environment. However, the focus was primarily on family relationships that impact negatively on wellbeing. Female groups spoke of the negative impact that alcohol and substance abuse have on family relations and domestic violence.

“And then also, not only is this [spending child support on alcohol] bad for the child, it's bad for the parents, because the moment you drink, violence, you can get sick, kidney disease, things like that. And then also if you’re alcoholic or drink irresponsibly, you can lose your job, you can lose your house and she also mentioned car crashes.” (Group 2, female)

Women spoke of absentee fathers and caregivers spending government child support grants on alcohol or other substances rather than to care for their children. Fragmented family structures also mean that in practice many children are under the care of the elderly that receive government support, and who can themselves be abused. Some women also mentioned how preferential treatment based on gender can preclude the development of good and caring relationships between children and their caregivers.

“Yes and majority of the time, such based on the wrong societal ideology about the gender-based. Whether you are a male child, my mother used to think my brother is everything because he was the only son.” (Group 2, female)

While family provided a sense of belonging, some women derived a sense of belonging and safety from friendship groups. They described the importance of having the opportunity to choose friends for the support structure that they offer.

“[...] to choose whoever I want to relate with and befriend. And an opportunity from those relations would be that they become more than friends, they can become family. Because we don't choose who our family is but you can choose the right group of friends [...].” (Group 3, female)

In turn, women valued spaces in which they can openly express themselves and people they can share worries with.

“This is a kasi chilling spot where we get to unfold and share our worries. It's a place of relief.” (Group 4, female)

Across male and female groups, participants spoke about peer-pressure from who they surrounded themselves with. Some believed that peer-pressure should have little impact as people ultimately have personal control over their decisions.

“I don't think peer pressure exists because everyone has his or her own choices. Remember there's a saying that says a life is a ball of clay and creation is at your fingertips. That means, if clay, you can shape anything that you want.” (Group 1, male)

However, many other participants spoke of the impact of who they surround themselves with on life outcomes through the choices that people influence them to make. Peer-pressure and social relations were often spoken about negatively, primarily in relation to alcohol or substance abuse, but many also spoke about benefits in relation to motivation, learning and exposure to opportunities.

“You can look at it in a positive way, thinking oh, my friend here has a degree in Medicine. That could be peer pressure, but that's something that could be encouraging me to go study as well.” (Group 1, male)

All groups also valued social relations more broadly and meeting new people. The photovoice project itself was described as enabling the development of interpersonal relations.

“What is nice about this whole experience is the fact that I get to meet new people. I actually did not know anyone from Mafikeng.” (Group 4, female)

As discussed under enjoyment and relaxation, communal land and spaces were vital for enabling socialising, primarily through communal events (Figure 9).

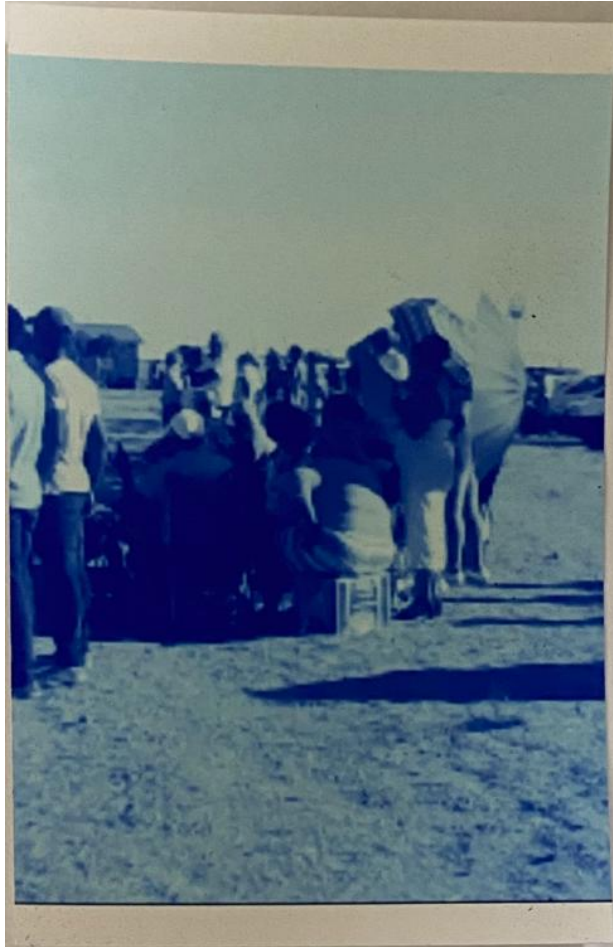


Figure 9. Participant 22 (female): *“People were smiling and having good times in the village. We were actually watching the soccer game where our brothers show their ability and talent.”*

Communal unity and identity

Communal relations and unity, or ‘Ubuntu’, and communal identity and knowing where you come from (‘Leboko’) were central to all group discussions of a good life. Communal relations and unity were intertwined with personal wellbeing and participants stated the importance of leaving no one behind in a community for a good life. Groups often spoke of personal success and gains as a means to help others in their community.

“Male 1: Yeah. If you win the competition, maybe as a singer you can become one of the best singers in South Africa so you have money, you can use that money to help not only you but other people. Maybe you can donate to charities, build schools.”

Male 2: Help rest of village” (Group 1, males)

This was without mentioning expectations of reciprocity, although helping others would gain them respect and leaving no one behind in a community provides them with a safety net as

well. For example, male participants spoke of the importance of being positive role models to help others in the community, which was also a way of gaining respect.

“So being a good person around the community and making sure that youth are following your footsteps, it’s a good thing.” (Group 1, male)

Nonetheless, Ubuntu values and helping others were most commonly regarded as important in themselves and for the positive outcomes they produce at a community level (Figure 10).

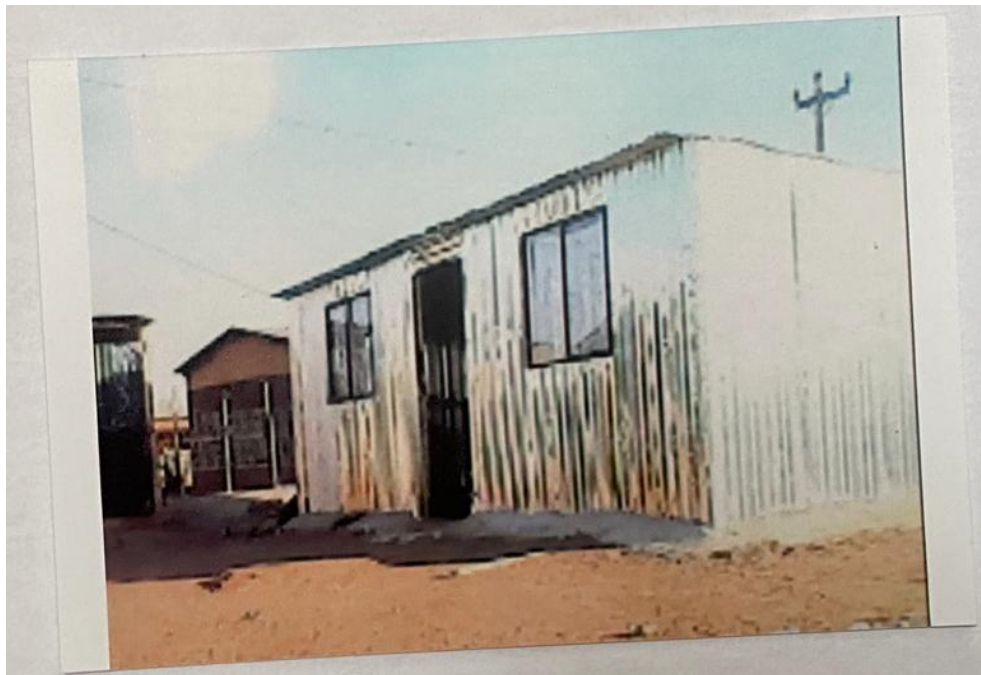


Figure 10. Participant 28 (female): *“Good life. Community coming together to donate a needy family with a home structure.”*

Ubuntu was closely linked with communal action and economic (e.g. pig rearing), cultural (e.g. talent shows for young people) and subsistence (e.g. community gardens) projects. Community projects improved social cohesion (‘unity’) and impacted positively on healthy diets, economic security, violence reduction, mental wellbeing and household wellbeing.

“They had a depleted mokhukhu [shack]. So the community came together and they donated and they built a brand new shack for them, they bought a bed for them, and like they furnished their Mokhukhu. So for me, it’s a good thing because it shows the Ubuntu that our community members have.” (Group 4, female)

While linked to Ubuntu, all groups spoke of communal identity as distinct and important for a good life. Communal identity was described as strengthening social relations, intergenerational learning and enabling people to have a sense of belonging that counteracts social fragmentation and engaging in crime and alcohol or substance abuse.

“To know where you come from exactly. And it’s a good thing because it takes kids away from the street.” (Group 3, female)

On areas such as littering or crime, viewed as a collective responsibility, some participants described negative perceptions of their communal identity as affecting them personally.

“When the beach was just like this [littered], but the beach. And then it was apparently because of people from the Trans-Vaal. When they say people from the Trans-Vaal, they're [the news] talking about us. Visitors. Don't you remember that? So basically if you're looking at this, aiiiishhhh, it's like it's so embarrassing to me.” (Group 1, male)

While there was consensus on the importance of communal identity, there were mixed views on the role of traditions in strengthening identity. Both men and women valued preserving cultural history, for example through world heritage day that celebrates traditional dance and dress and other communal celebrations or events which were seen as promoting unity.

“People coming together when there is a funeral, unveiling or any kind of celebration. The unity will [be] shown throughout the whole process to the end.” (Group 2, female)

However, other traditions were controversial, in particular ways of carrying out daily activities (e.g. cooking with a three-legged pot) that were perceived as dangerous. Participants who valued traditions such as cooking with a three-legged pot, despite health hazards, did so for the potential of preserving their culture more generally and avoiding a reliance on interrupted electricity supplies.

“If you know that you're gonna need the woods [for cooking] you need go and take them and put them in a safe place. So that you know that when you do it [cooking on fire with three-legged pot] you're gonna need them. And also if there's load shedding [electricity blackout], you can make food!” (Group 2, female)

Environmental wellbeing

Several participants valued nature and the environment for their intrinsic beauty and opportunity to spend time outdoors (Figure 11).

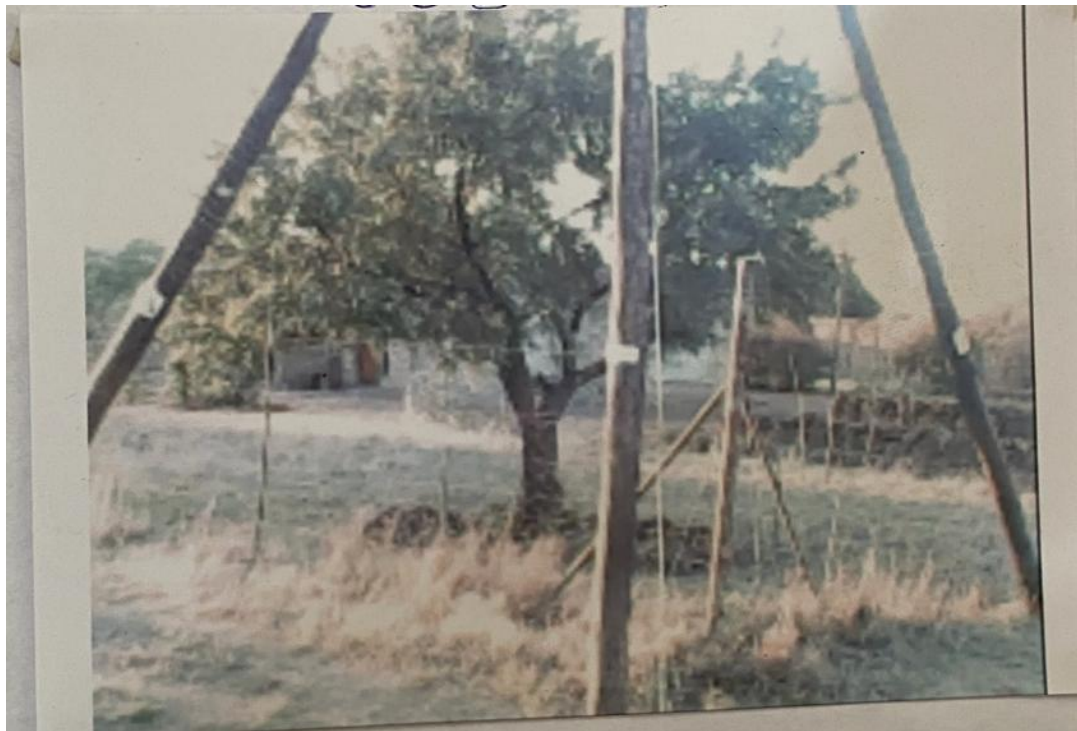


Figure 11. Participant 37 (female): *“Good life. It shows nature and it feels good to be surrounded by nature.”*

“I just wanted to show that there's also the good side to having a clean and beautiful environment. The scenery is also beautiful.” (Group 3, female)

The close relationship between participants, animals (e.g. livestock) and the environment (e.g. farming) is apparent from discussions for various reasons such as meeting basic needs or wellbeing, but participants also valued the act of caring for animals in itself and some explicitly mentioned animal wellbeing as part of a good life.

“This picture shows a dog chained (leashed) to a tree stump, this is a bad picture because firstly the dog is chained with a extension cable, and is very short so the dog can hardly move around which is not good for the health and development of this dog.” (Group 1, Male)

Similarly, although planting and cultivation were clearly valued as a source of food (e.g. private or communal gardens), the act of planting and caring for nature were also valued in and of themselves.

“Rose trees signify love, growth peace and purity. I regard it as a good life because I planted it and I nurture it regularly” (Group 1, Male)

Several men and women viewed a clean and healthy environment as a collective responsibility and women spoke of actively picking up recyclable rubbish as a source of income and to clean the environment.

“When you're recycling you are cleaning the environment at the same time you are generating an income for yourself. So, if we are all going to play that part, we're not going to have such waste, whereby we are going to dispose it in a negative way that is going to affect our environment and affect our health.” (Group 2, female)

All groups valued clean environments and clean air for the various activities that they enable and spoke of the substantial negative impact that littering has in their communities. A clean environment was seen as essential for good health, rearing livestock, community gardens and farming, sources of water, and space for communal activities and children to play.

“Unfortunately, some of these waste it goes in the river, whereby the water in the river is no longer safe for animal consumption. And also even the children, when it's hot, they don't have the swimming pools, they go there. You've got I think four to five people who went into that water, drowned and died. The water is not a lot, but because it's poisonous people are dying when they come up there.” (Group 2, female)

DISCUSSION

We worked with adults in Mahikeng Local Municipality to conceptualise a ‘good’ life by applying Sen’s capability framework using PhotoVoice. Photographs taken by participants and subsequent group discussions achieved saturation in most themes related to a good life and produced rich insight not only into valued capabilities but also the context in which they were valued and the interrelatedness between participants, their families, communities and environment. There are many similarities between the eleven themes identified in this study

and a previous study carried out in South Africa as well as widely used capability lists or measures. However, there are also key differences, primarily related to themes of community and the environment, which build on the existing evidence-base by better understanding the meaning of a good life in an understudied rural area in South Africa. Below, we discuss our results in relation to existing evidence before comparing our findings with other published capability lists and measures.

The basic needs of most participants and their communities were not met. As found by other studies from South Africa, although not all focus on a 'good' life using Sen's capability approach, poverty-related factors such as a lack of water, housing, electricity, food, and a lack of income impacted negatively on the lives of participants (Brown et al., 2024; Clark, 2003; Koen & Robertson, 2021). For example, challenges with water security mirrored those of a recent study on the social significance of food insecurity in KwaZulu Natal in which women from rural areas spoke of long distances and time required to fetch water (Brown et al., 2024). So too did the negative impact of food insecurity, electricity and unemployment.

These similarities are likely due to nationwide structural inequalities (Kon & Lackan, 2008; Polus et al., 2020). Indeed, many of the themes identified from this study align with those reported in the list of 38 functional capabilities published by Clark (2003), discussed further below, developed 20 years ago with participants from Western Cape Province. Commonly used capability measures developed in high-income countries, such as the ICECAP-A, typically omit basic needs or capabilities (e.g. having access to clean water), perhaps because they are seen as a given by most people (Greco et al., 2015). However, findings from this study support others from low- and middle-income countries highlighting the centrality of considering basic needs and capabilities (Clark, 2003; Greco et al., 2015).

At a provincial level, there is to the best of our knowledge only one other wellbeing study carried out with community members from North West Province (Koen & Robertson, 2021). Using the World Café method, the study investigated experiences of psycho-social wellbeing with 20 adults from the rural community of Lokaleng in Mahikeng. The study does not employ the capabilities approach, but there is substantial alignment of results and findings across themes. That said, applying the capabilities approach using PhotoVoice with participants from many communities in the municipality offered additional breadth and richness in the data collected. This produced the key insights below that are of relevance to wider literature.

Many participants in our study spoke of communal identity, collective action through community projects, helping others and Ubuntu values, which are rooted in the interconnectedness of people with their communities and environment. Being part of a strong community that leaves no one behind was valued in itself as central to a good life, as well as the outcomes that collective action produces. Communal unity, collective action and responsibility were linked with all other dimensions of a good life in our study. For example, communal economic projects, resulting from collective action and responsibility, were described as improving economic security, personal wellbeing, household and family wellbeing and reducing crime and violence.

Previous studies by Greco et al. (2015) in Malawi and Clark (2003) in South Africa also found close links between communal and personal wellbeing. However, our results differ from the Malawi findings which were closely linked with concepts of social capital. While social capital and Ubuntu both focus on relationships and community, the focus of social

capital theory is on the benefits from social connections (Häuberer, 2011) – compared with Ubuntu which is concerned with collective moral and ethical responsibilities to others (Hoffmann & Metz, 2017; Kuhumba, 2017). Social capital theory therefore only captures part of communal unity and identity in our study. The study by Clark (2003) in Western Cape, South Africa does report Ubuntu values among participants. However, these are discussed as holding less of a central role compared with our study. This may be due to different data collection methods, analysis and the different province and corresponding rural, predominantly black Tswana demographic of participants in our study.

While Sen's capability approach sees humans in the context of their communities, society and environment, the focus is on individual agency and action which provides an incomplete view of what a 'good' life entails in communities such as Mahikeng. By omitting key areas such as collective agency and responsibility, the capability approach is at odds with sub-Saharan African philosophy and associated communal values (Fourie & Rathbone, 2024; Hoffmann & Metz, 2017; Kuhumba, 2017). Despite tensions between communitarianism and individualism, our findings suggest that participants value both and balance these to varying degrees. Our study therefore supports propositions for expanding the capability approach and associated measures so that they better capture values related to communal unity and identity and notions of collective agency and responsibility (Hoffmann & Metz, 2017; Ibrahim, 2006; Kuhumba, 2017; Pelenc et al., 2015). This is particularly important when formulating policy. Rather than solely targeting individual- or household-level opportunities, policies that also consider Ubuntu values, collective agency and responsibility would intervene to strengthen communal wellbeing and structures to ensure that no one is left behind. In addition, some dimensions of a good life identified, primarily environmental wellbeing, are arguably unattainable in the absence of collective action and responsibility (Pelenc et al., 2015; Pelenc et al., 2016).

Participant relationships with the natural environment varied. While the environment was described as sustaining human life and a factor that enables other capabilities, several participants in our study also highlighted the intrinsic value of a healthy environment. For some, being surrounded in nature and its 'beauty' and caring for plants or animals were among their ten most valued beings and doings. These results support ongoing efforts to incorporate considerations of the environment into the capabilities approach (Pelenc et al., 2016; Sangha et al., 2015; Schlosberg, 2012), which also recognise the importance of integrating collective action and responsibility (Pelenc et al., 2015; Pelenc et al., 2016). We argue that these efforts are crucial if capabilities are to inform policy and reflect the varied relationships that humans have with the environment, while addressing notions of intergenerational justice within the capabilities approach (Page, 2007). Children and future generations were central to perceptions of a good life in our study (e.g. schooling, caring for family, being a role model to young people) and environmental wellbeing impacts not only on current capabilities but also on the capabilities of future generations.

Below, we briefly discuss and compare our findings with three published capability lists: Clark's (2003) list of 38 functional capabilities, the Women's capabilities index (Greco et al., 2015), and the ICECAP-A measure (Al-Janabi et al., 2012). Clark's (2003) list of functional capabilities was selected as it remains, to the best of our knowledge, the only general capabilities list developed in South Africa. The Women's capabilities index was selected as the only published capabilities measure for intervention evaluation developed in a low- or middle-income country and in a rural setting (Helter et al., 2020). Last, ICECAP-A was

selected given that it is a widely used evaluation measure to inform policymaking and public resource allocation (Helter et al., 2020).

Clark's list of functional capabilities

Clark's (2003) list of 38 functional capabilities map closely onto our findings, although they vary in their breadth. For example, 'wellbeing' in our study comprises several functional capabilities in Clark's (2003) list, such as happiness, good health, sleep and rest, access to family planning and exercise. However, our list of eleven capabilities differs from Clark's (2003) findings in two key ways. First, while 'living in a clean natural environment' from Clark's (2003) list captures aspects of environmental wellbeing in our study, communal unity and helping or caring for others is absent from Clark's (2003) list. Second, 'sexual satisfaction' was absent from our study, although this would in practice be captured as a sub-dimension within enjoyment or wellbeing. That said, the study by Clark (2003) does state that many people either refused to answer or claimed they did not value sexual satisfaction.

Women's capability index

There are many similarities between our findings and the Women's capabilities index developed in Malawi (Greco et al., 2015). For example, 'household wellbeing' and 'economic security' map almost exactly to belonging, family and social relations and economic security in our study. Personal wellbeing in our study captures the physical strength, inner wellbeing and happiness dimensions from the Women's capabilities index. In turn, several themes from our study such as dignity and respect or freedom from violence are captured within the 'household wellbeing' and 'community relations' themes in the Women's capabilities index. However, the Women's capabilities index does not capture the learning and development, voice and political representation, and environmental wellbeing themes from our study. Alongside this, our communal theme incorporates communal identity and leaving no one behind in the community, which are not directly captured by the 'community relations' theme in the Women's capabilities index.

ICECAP-A

The ICECAP-A (Al-Janabi et al., 2012), increasingly used as a personal measure of capabilities in economic evaluations to inform policy (Helter et al., 2020), capture most dimensions of a good life as conceptualised by participants in our study. However, some wording such as 'love' does not map well to our findings. Rather than love, participants spoke primarily of 'caring' relationships with family and other important people in their lives. This is similar to findings from Clark (2003). Safety and freedom from violence, which was central in our study, is also only somewhat captured by the ICECAP-A dimension "feeling settled and secure". Some dimensions of a good life identified by participants are not captured altogether by the ICECAP-A measure, namely environmental wellbeing and Ubuntu values of interconnectedness with community, dignity and respect.

Limitations

Several limitations should be noted when reporting and interpreting our results. First, due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the time and resources available to us, we were unable to sequence group discussions and iteratively develop these based on preliminary outputs when working with participants. All photographic sorting and group discussions were held on the same day. An iterative approach would have enabled additional depth to be achieved within sub-themes related to community and nature, along with potential tensions between collectivism and individualism. Second, an iterative study design with more time would have enabled additional analysis with participants and a mixed methods approach, for example

through pile sorting or by incorporating group concept mapping based on study participant photographs (Bourey et al., 2012; Haque & Rosas, 2010). Third, our sample was formed of former educational assistants, nominated by school principals from a district selected in consultation with the Department of Basic Education. Participants may therefore have had higher education exposure, agency and aspirations compared with other community members and the selection of participants by school principals increased the risk of selection bias. The majority of participants were also female, which may have underrepresented male perspectives in some areas. The representativeness of our sample would have been improved by including participants from the general population who have not previously worked as educational assistants, from several municipalities, and with a closer balance of males. Overall, while our findings have implications for wider literature, they are context-specific and are not generalisable beyond rural communities in Mahikeng and North West Province.

In conclusion, photovoice enabled the discussion of capabilities rooted in places, people and time, thus highlighting the interrelatedness of personal capabilities with household, communal and environmental wellbeing. Our findings show that a good life in Mahikeng cannot be conceptualised without incorporating considerations of communal and environmental wellbeing. This includes notions of collective agency and responsibility, which were important factors in our study. This study supports arguments for expanding capability lists and measures to better reflect communal and environmental values, such as those of participants in Mahikeng, and the interconnectedness of humans with their communities and environments.

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