

Participation as a Capability for Poverty Reduction in Informal Settlements: A Case of Bulawayo Urban, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

With informal settlements becoming a central urban feature in developing countries, reducing poverty and disaster risks in these contexts is becoming a priority. Although the participatory approach is increasingly touted as effective for poverty and disaster risk reduction, the perspectives of residents of informal settlements are rarely considered. Using the capability approach, this study investigates the perspectives of people living in four informal settlements in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, on participation as a capability for poverty reduction. Employing a critical realist methodology and a multi-case study design, the research draws on data from 243 households and four focus group discussions. Findings reveal that the capability of “control over one’s environment” is highly valued for poverty reduction. Power and social structures define levels of participation. Power is seen as either political, social, or economic. While social power is concentrated among residents, political and economic power, which are the substratum of participation, are concentrated externally. Participation in informal settlements is largely tokenistic due to their low socio-economic status and challenges in exercising counterpower. Resources and the complex interplay of conversion factors constrain effective participation. This study contributes to the discourse on poverty by reframing participation as both a developmental goal and an instrumental capability.

Keywords

Informal Settlements, Poverty, Poverty Reduction, Disaster, Capability Approach, Participation, Agency

1. Introduction

Informal settlements are becoming a ubiquitous feature of urban development in

the Global South. These communities often face material deprivation, overcrowded housing, and inadequate access to clean water and basic infrastructure (Dovey et al., 2020), making them a development concern. Residential illegality and socio-economic marginality often exclude people living in informal settlements from social protection, making it difficult for them to escape poverty (Kamete, 2013). In Africa, some cities still use colonial justifications to legitimise evictions of poor communities, exacerbating their vulnerability to poverty and various hazards (Azunre & Boateng, 2023). While conventional top-down approaches to poverty and disaster response are important, studies show that inclusive approaches are more effective in addressing the vulnerability of marginalised communities (Trohanis et al., 2022).

The term “informal settlement” emerged in the 1990s to replace terms such as “slums” (Balbim, 2024) in describing marginalised urban neighbourhoods. Although the literature on the participation and agency of residents in these contexts remains limited, emerging research documents forms of resistance and collective action that illustrate agency in practice (Fattah & Walters, 2023). Furthermore, participatory informal settlement upgrading programmes are seen as more successful compared to non-participatory programmes (Horn et al., 2020). These observations underscore that people living in informal settlements are not just bystanders and passive victims of poverty and disaster risks, but can contribute to poverty and disaster risk reduction if they are effectively empowered and involved.

Recognising the importance of participation, the United Nations included the “Leave No One Behind” mantra in Agenda 2030. It also set aside target 7 of SDG 16, which aims to promote responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels. Participation is linked to freedom and agency (Robeyns, 2017) and to the concepts of power or empowerment (Sibanda & Lues, 2021). Enhancing participation is one pathway to strengthening human agency and increasing decision-making power for people in informal settlements.

Drawing on the ladder of citizen participation developed by Arnstein (1969) and the capability approach advanced by Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2000), this paper explores participation as both a valued capability and a mechanism for enhancing agency for poverty reduction in urban informal settlements. Four informal settlements in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe’s second capital, are used as the case study.

2. Theoretical Frameworks

This article utilises Arnstein’s ladder of citizen participation and the Capability Approach as its theoretical frameworks. Sherry Arnstein developed the ladder of citizen participation in 1969 (Gaber, 2019). The ladder of citizen participation was chosen because it was developed for urban planning (Varwell, 2022) and remains a valuable tool for measuring how citizens shape decisions that affect them (Hussey, 2020). The Capability Approach was developed by the Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen and further developed by Martha Nussbaum (Güner, 2019). It offers

an alternative framework to the dominant economic discourse, helping to understand participation in multidimensional poverty contexts, such as informal settlements. The Capability Approach also emphasises agency and the realisation that even poor communities have what they value and have reason to value.

2.1. Arnstein's Ladder of Participation

Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation conceptualizes participation as a ladder with eight rungs. The rungs range from citizen non-participation to complete control. The rungs are grouped into three categories: non-participation, where there is manipulation and therapy; the tokenism category, which includes informing, consultation, and placation; and, lastly, citizen power, which encompasses partnership, delegated power, and citizen control.

Arnstein (1969) argued that the ladder juxtaposes powerless citizens with influential citizens. The concept of power is closely connected to participation in disaster and development discourse. Foucault argued that "power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (Foucault, 1976: p. 93). His view rejects the assumption that power is centralized in the government or those in power (Elden, 2017). According to Foucault, there are three main types of power: sovereign power, disciplinary power, and biopower (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2014).

Sovereign power refers to the ways the government makes and enforces laws and policies (Tanyanyiwa et al., 2023). In informal settlements, it is exercised by the government through evictions and threats of demolition. Operation Murambatsvina in Zimbabwe is a classic example of the state exercising its sovereign power. Although the state has several ways of regulating people's behaviour through its sovereign power, society has its own ways of resistance, which Foucault referred to as "counterpower" (Tanyanyiwa et al., 2023). Gee (2010) identifies idea, physical, and economic as the three forms of counterpower. The idea counterpower is exercised when one challenges what is accepted as truth through disobedience; physical counterpower is direct action to counter oppression, such as encroaching and occupying private urban spaces. Economic counterpower occurs when residents challenge the economic system, for example, by setting up vending stalls close to large shops, challenging the dominance of large traders.

Disciplinary power refers to the ways social norms and institutional structures regulate people's behaviour. Institutions such as schools, prisons, and hospitals often regulate one's behaviour (Tanyanyiwa et al., 2023). Biopower is a formative force used for the administration of society to protect and promote certain types of lifestyles (Alim, 2019). Local authorities can exercise biopower through the provision of infrastructure, such as roads and schools.

In Arnstein's ladder, genuine empowerment occurs when the citizens gain control and make their own decisions. In informal settlements, participation often falls in the lower rungs of Arnstein's ladder, which are characterised by non-participation and tokenism. Many activities undertaken by the state and NGOs in-

clude surveys and engagement campaigns. However, the decision remains at the state or NGO level, which is categorised as tokenism in Arnstein's ladder (Terdoo, 2024). For example, in the Mukuru, Nairobi case study (Horn et al., 2020), public meetings called *barakas* were employed as participatory tools but remained at the tokenism level of consultation.

Recent studies highlight the need to elevate participation to higher rungs of the Arnstein ladder, where communities can participate and have control over decisions. A typical example is Ga Mashie, Accra, Ghana (UN-Habitat, 2020), where community assessments were combined with community-based planning, resulting in the community having real influence over planning and implementation, placing this approach at the partnership rung, which is real participation in Arnstein's ladder (Terdoo, 2024).

2.2. The Capability Approach

While the capability approach does not explicitly foreground participation, concepts such as freedom, agency, and democratic engagement are closely linked to participatory practices (Hammock, 2019). The capability approach focuses on individuals' fundamental freedoms, such as engaging in activities and achieving states they have reason to value, such as opportunities (capabilities) and achievements (functionings) (Sen, 1999; Jadhav, 2020). Agency refers to individuals' ability to pursue goals they value and have reason to value (Ton et al., 2021). Participation in this context serves as both a means and an end, enabling the acquisition of resources, services, and freedom (Ton et al., 2021). Reinforcing the importance of participation and agency, Sen (1999) states that.

“People have to be seen, in this perspective, as being actively involved—given the opportunity—in shaping their destiny, and not just as passive recipients of the fruits of cunning development programs” (Sen, 1999: p. 11)

The central human functional capabilities (CHFCS) developed by Nussbaum (2011) include the capability to “control one's political environment”, such as political and social life choices (Robeyns, 2017). Nussbaum (2011) offers two aspects of control over one's environment: political and material control. Material control encompasses the freedom to own assets, such as being employed, having relationships with other people, and being mutually respected (Chinyakata et al., 2023). Although anyone can acquire and own assets in Zimbabwe, as enshrined in Section 71(2) of the Constitution (Government of Zimbabwe, 2013a), the type and quality of properties are defined by the socio-economic status of the individual. The low socio-economic status of people living in informal settlements makes them fail to obtain some goods and assets.

Political control encompasses the freedom to have and express one's political beliefs, including freedom of speech, political association, and the right to protest (Nussbaum, 2011). Chinyakata et al. (2023) identify two ways of political control: being involved in decision-making and speaking out against state inadequacies. Although freedom of political participation is outlined in Section 67 of the Zim-

babwe Constitution (Government of Zimbabwe, 2013b), political freedoms are sometimes restricted in the name of maintaining public order and safety.

Within urban poor communities, particularly informal settlements, human agency often manifests in claims for recognition (Rigon, 2022), claiming rights (Arefin & Rashid, 2021), and resistance (Soliman, 2024). Some scholars argue that informal settlements represent a form of agency. Agency is exercised by residents who actively assert social and spatial claims to the city space, a phenomenon called *occupancy urbanism* (Benjamin, 2019).

3. Study Area

Bulawayo, the second-largest city in Zimbabwe, was once the country's industrial hub but has undergone a dramatic transformation due to de-industrialisation. Before independence, the city's strategic location, including its railway network and proximity to South Africa and Botswana, enabled it to flourish in the textiles, engineering, and food processing industries (Chinjova, 2019; Chenga & Zikhali, 2020). Post-independence, the increase in the population of informal settlements in Bulawayo resulted from Matabeleland and Midlands political disturbances (*Gukurahundi*) between 1983 and 1987 (Mpofu, 2012). Many survivors of *Gukurahundi* sought refuge in urban centres such as Bulawayo. However, poverty, characterised by housing shortages and social exclusion, relegated them to informal settlements such as Killarney, Ngozi Mine and Trenace (Mpofu, 2021).

The economic challenges resulting from the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) in the 1990s and the economic collapse in the 2000s further caused rapid de-industrialisation in Bulawayo (Mlambo, 2017). The decade-long economic crisis in Zimbabwe, from 2000 to 2009, saw the economy shrink to unprecedented levels (Mbira, 2015).

The loss of jobs led people to an increase in the informal sector as people sought alternative livelihoods (Moyo, 2018). The government's failure to resuscitate industries through funding mechanisms such as Distressed and Marginalised Area Funds (DIMAF) exacerbated the situation due to funding limitations, poor implementation, and corruption (Zhou & Zvoushe, 2012). Lack of income disrupted service provision in the city, resulting in housing shortages, water shortages, and road damage (Marumahoko, 2020).

The population in informal settlements further increased in mid-2005, coinciding with the central-party-driven mass urban evictions and demolitions known as Operation Restore Order/Murambatsvina (Hammar, 2017). In Bulawayo, efforts supported by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) helped some affected people from Trenance and Killarney to be resettled in the Mazwi area, 20 km from Bulawayo City Centre, in 2012 (Hammar, 2017). To date, some residents of the Killarney and Trenance informal settlements are still awaiting resettlement.

Figure 1 shows the study area, which comprises four informal settlements: Richmond Landfill, popularly known as Ngozi Mine, Trenance, Killarney, and Cabatsha. These informal settlements were selected because they are some of the

city's oldest and most densely populated informal neighbourhoods. Despite their varied historical trajectories and experiences, they share common characteristics such as poverty, social exclusion, and marginalisation, making them suitable for a multi-case study.

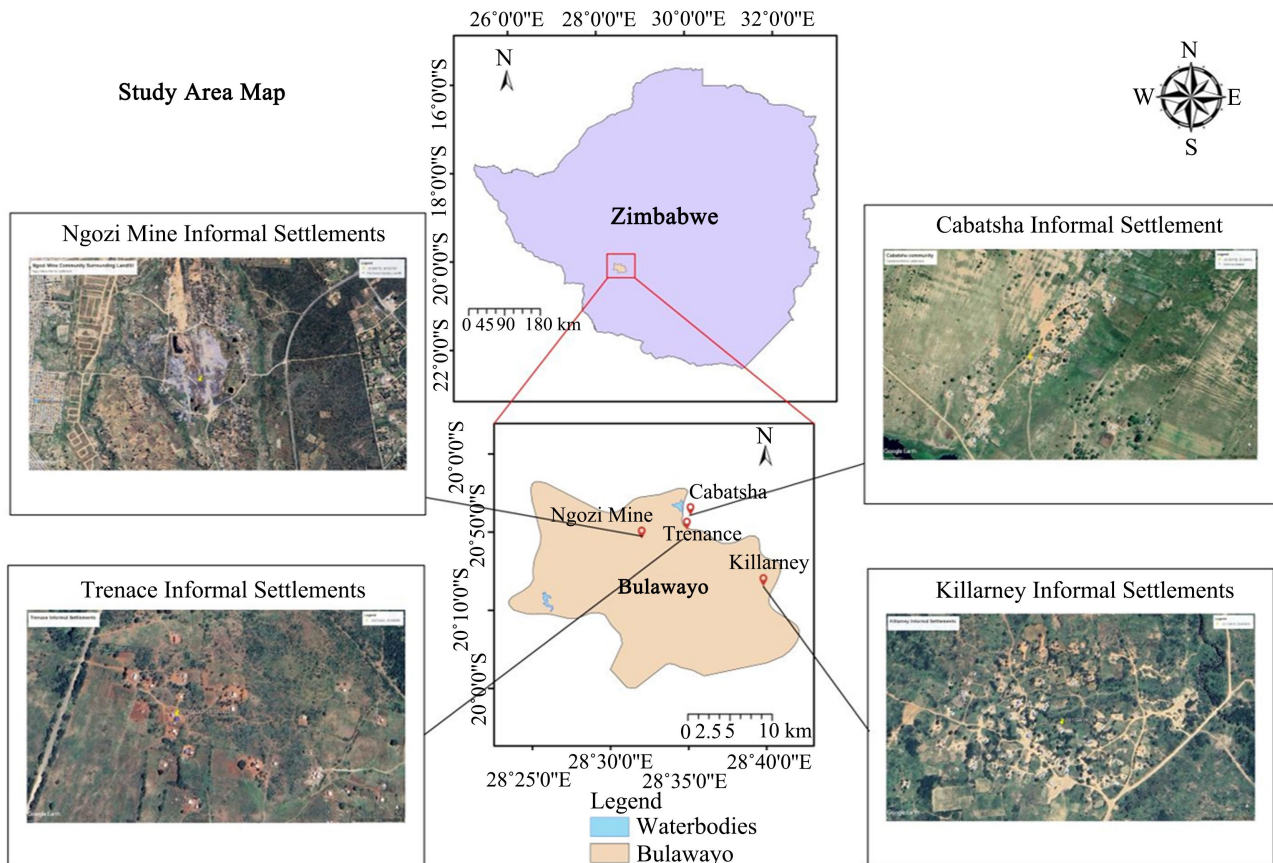


Figure 1. Map showing the study area. Source: Author (2024).

The Ngozi Mine settlement began in 1984 and underwent significant expansion during the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) in 1990 and Operation Murambatsvina in 2005. Ngozi Mine is near Richmond's landfill, the city's primary waste disposal site (Teta & Hikwa, 2017). It is owned and controlled by the Bulawayo City Council. In the local language, *Ngozi* means "danger", reflecting the presence of hazardous chemical and physical materials at the dumpsites. Residents of the settlements largely depend on waste picking and scavenging for survival, which reinforces their dependency on the refuse system and highlights their deepening vulnerability (Ibrahim et al., 2022). The shelters are constructed from scrap materials found at the dumpsite, such as metal sheets, plastic, and wood. There is no potable water source and no sanitation facilities. Income is generated from the sale of waste collected from the dump sites, and waste buyers travel as far as Harare to purchase it, as it is considered cheaper in Bulawayo.

Cabatsha is a peri-urban informal settlement located on the border of Trenace's low-density suburb and Bulawayo City farms. The Cabatsha settlement was part

of private farmland allocated as a residential area for farm workers. The residents claim that after Zimbabwe's Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP), farmers handed over the land to the residents as part of their pension. However, there is a lack of legal documentation, and the government does not recognise these claims. Shelter structures in rural areas typically follow traditional types, which consist of mud huts with grass thatch (Chigwenya & Simbanegavi, 2021). Most households have pit latrines, and water is a challenge. However, during drought, the City of Bulawayo occasionally provides water through bowsers. Some NGOs provide food and material assistance to the most vulnerable households (Murisa & Satuku, 2023).

Killarney and Trenance were established in 1981 and 1983, respectively, during the Gukurahundi conflict, which occurred in Matabeleland and Midlands provinces in post-independence Zimbabwe, targeting perceived dissidents. Although the settlements were slightly depopulated after the end of the conflict, Operation Murambatsvina in 2005 and subsequent economic challenges led to an increase in the population. Livelihoods are based on low-wage and insecure jobs such as domestic work, reinforcing the socio-economic subordination that exists. A few residents are employed in gold mines and farms, but employment is seasonal and casual. The shelter is made of iron sheets and plastic materials. The shelter material shows spatialized inequality and differences in access to resources and power.

4. Materials and Methods

This study integrates the capability approach with critical realism, a combination increasingly adopted in explanatory research across disciplines, including disaster risk reduction (Ton et al., 2021), social work (Kjellberg & Jansson, 2022), and development studies (Mazigo & Hattingh, 2020). The critical realist methodology integrates flexibility and enhances the explanatory strength of the capability approach. Fleetwood (2014) articulated that critical realism is grounded in a layered ontology, a constructivist epistemology, and a pluralistic methodology. Its flexibility allows researchers to employ quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods, making it especially relevant to studies of complex social phenomena such as poverty.

Given the multifaceted and context-specific nature of urban poverty, a multi-case study approach was adopted to gather in-depth data from the four selected informal settlements (Yin, 2018; Fearon et al., 2021). Multi-case analysis appears well-suited to unpacking complex, real-world challenges. The University of the Free State's Ethics Committee granted ethical clearance for this study under clearance number UFS-HSD2024/1303.

4.1. Population and Sampling

The dynamic nature of informal settlements and the lack of official documentation make estimating the population difficult in informal settlements (Samper et

al., 2020). However, based on unverified estimates by local authority, NGOs and community leaders there approximately 650 households. The total population is estimated at 2600 people. The Ngozi Mine community comprises 300 households, with a population of 1200 people. Killarney has 130 households with 520 people, Trenance has 120 households with 480 people, and Cabatsha has 100 households accommodating approximately 400 people.

Based on the population size of 650 households, 95% confidence levels, and 5% margin of error, the sample yielded 248 households.

The formula below depicts how the final sample size was obtained.

$$n = N / (1 + N * e^2)$$

where:

n = Sample size

N = Population size

e = Margin of error

$$n = 650 / (1 + 650 * 0.05^2)$$

$n = 248$.

Although this study targeted 248 individuals for household data collection, 243 were achieved as shown in **Table 1**. Some individuals refused to participate in the interviews or left the interview before completion as they prioritized income generation.

Table 1. Population and the number of residents interviewed in each settlement.

Settlements	Approximate number of households	Sample size as a proportion of the total household	Actual number reached
Ngozi Mine	300	114	123
Killarney	130	50	51
Trenance	120	46	27
Cabatsha	100	38	42
Total	650	248	243

Source: Author (2025).

Each settlement's sample was proportionate to the number of households. Each settlement was clustered, and the fraction of each cluster determined the number of homes questioned. Given the fluctuating population of informal settlements, convenient sampling was used to identify respondents (Gevaert et al., 2019). The convenient sampling enabled the study to reach more participants, given the challenges of road networks, lack of formal addresses, and difficulties in mobilising communities during the day as they would be involved in livelihood activities. For Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), the study also purposely identified 32 commu-

nity leaders (eight in each settlement) as participants. Participants for the focus group discussions were purposely sampled from leadership structures, including religious, political, and social groups. The household questionnaire was developed on paper and transferred to the digital devices using an online digital data tool called Kobo Collect. Both the household questionnaire and FGD tool were checked by the research supervisors and were piloted in Ngozi mine with 10 participants from the settlement. Piloting the tools helped in refining questions and language, making them relevant to the respondents.

4.2. Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected from 23 October 2024 to 9 November 2024. Before data collection, five research assistants were trained in data collection tools. Five research assistants used a computerised Kobo Toolkit household questionnaire, which contained questions on demographics and perceptions about social, economic, political, and collective participation. Each household questionnaire took 30 - 40 minutes. The primary investigator led four focus group discussions (FGDs), each divided into two sessions. Each FGD consisted of eight community leaders, and it took 50 - 60 minutes to complete each discussion. The trained research assistants collected all the notes from the discussions. Allowing unbridled discussions through FGDs helped the study collect social and cultural nuances. Using multiple data collection tools and combining qualitative and quantitative data enhanced the rigour and depth of the findings.

4.3. Data Analysis

Deductive and adaptive theme analysis was used to evaluate qualitative data from key informant interviews and focus group discussions (Fletcher, 2017). SPSS version 27 was used to analyse quantitative data. Data were classified, and demi-irregularities were found using critical realism (Fletcher, 2017). Data analysis used critical realism's abduction, retroduction, retrodiction, and data triangulation to identify resources, factors, structures, and causal mechanisms (Summers, 2020; Fryer, 2022).

5. Results

5.1. Demographics

Among the 243 household survey participants in the four informal communities, 64.2% were female, while 35.8% were male, as shown in **Table 2**. Generally, studies have shown that women are more willing to participate in studies than men (Otufowora et al., 2020). Men are often unwilling to participate in surveys, as they believe it wastes their time (Khumalo et al., 2023; Phiri et al., 2021). In this study, most men spend their daytime away from home trying to earn a living for their families as a poverty adaptation strategy, while women spend time at home taking care of children and preparing meals.

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of the household survey respondents.

Variables	Categories	Frequency	Percent
Settlement	Cabatsha	42	17.28%
	Killarney	51	20.99%
	Ngozi Mine	123	50.62%
	Trenance	27	11.11%
Gender of the respondent	Male	87	35.80%
	Female	156	64.20%
Age of the respondent	18 - 29 years	52	21.40%
	30 - 39 years	64	26.34%
	40 - 49 years	63	25.93%
	50 - 59 years	32	13.17%
	60 years and above	32	13.17%
Marital Status	Married	68	27.98%
	Never Married	60	24.69%
	Living as Married/Cohabiting	44	18.11%
	Separated	32	13.17%
	Widowed	31	12.76%
	Divorced	8	3.29%

Source: [Authors \(2024\)](#). Data from the household survey.

Nearly half of the study participants (46%) were either married (28%) or cohabiting (18%), followed by those who were never married (25%), separated (13%), widowed (13%), and divorced (3%). Poverty and insecurity in informal settlements make it difficult for people, especially women, to stay single. While all residents of informal settlements are classified as impoverished, married persons have comparatively superior access to resources and income compared to other demographics ([Clark et al., 2019](#)).

The average household size in the four settlements is 4.6, which is markedly higher than Bulawayo city's average of 3.7, according to the Zimbabwe 2022 Population and Housing Census Report ([ZIMSTATS, 2022](#)). Increased household size results from extended families that often collaborate for enhanced resource acquisition. Increased average household sizes in informal settlements are frequently associated with elevated poverty levels ([Meyer & Nishiwe-Niyimbanira, 2016](#)). The study indicated that most respondents were aged 30 to 39 (26.3%), followed by those aged 40 to 49 (25.9%). Respondents aged 18 to 29 constituted 21.4%, while those aged 50 to 59 years and 60 years and above each represented 13.2%. The analysis indicated that individuals aged 59 and younger represent the predominant demographic, as most of their livelihood activities require physical fit-

ness. This result indicates a lack of sustainable livelihood sources, such as formal employment, in Bulawayo, as most residents in the four informal settlements are younger than 59.

5.2. Power Dynamics in Informal Settlements

The study participants identified six power levels in informal settlements: national government, local government, economic players, settlement leaders, household heads, and individual levels, as shown in **Table 3**.

Table 3. Focus group discussion summary of power levels.

Level	Perceived Power	Type
National Government level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political power to make decisions • Power to evict them, demolition • Power to protect and provide law and order 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political
Local Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Power to decide on their location • Power to evict them and demolish their structures • Power to provide services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political
Economic players and traders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Power to employ and dismiss • Power to determine prices, marketable goods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic
Local Settlement Committee and the leader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Power to call meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited political
Household Head	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Power to make household decisions • Power to make decisions about other household members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic • Social activities
Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Power to make decisions about oneself 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social • Limited political

Source: Author (2025).

The focus group participants highlighted that participation and power in informal settlements are intertwined and distributed unevenly across different levels. Although [Turcan \(2024\)](#) stated that there is a distinction between political and sovereign power, this study revealed that people in informal settlements equate political power with sovereign power. This shows the conflation of the legal system and politics in Zimbabwe, where the law is used as a tool for state power ([Karekwaivanane, 2017](#)). Political power is most concentrated at the national and local government levels. However, there is contestation for power between the national and local governments due to divergent political views.

“In our case, politicians possess all the power, they have the power to evict us and the power to give us better places to stay and to protect us.” [FGD participant in Ngozi Mine]

This sentiment shows that decisions such as land tenure and access to services are relegated to the national or local government level. The community perceives itself as powerless in decisions about citizens' rights. Terdoo (2024) noted that such top-down power dynamics result in unsustainable outcomes.

“Even though political power is concentrated at the national and local government levels, we still have some limited power to choose those representatives... however, our votes do not change the outcome as we are only a small fraction of the larger constituency.” [FGD participant in Trenace]

Economic power is also held mainly by external stakeholders such as employers, waste buyers, and traders. They control the opportunities for income generation, as these actors often determine the types of marketable goods and set the employment terms and conditions. Economic counterpower is limited due to limited economies of scale and individualism in economic activities. Some NGOs have attempted to bring waste pickers together to form groups for material aggregation and to negotiate as a collective. However, the divide and rule tactics employed by waste buyers and other traders weaken the bargaining power.

Within the household, the head often decides how resources such as money and food should be used and which income opportunities to pursue. Social power is primarily situated at the household and individual levels. Worldviews, social beliefs, and survival strategies shape social relationships.

5.3. Participation as a Capability for Poverty Reduction

Figure 2 presents household survey responses on the importance of having control over one's environment as a poverty reduction capability. Most participants (72%) see control over one's environment as very important, 8% as important, 16% as moderately important, 4% as less important, and 1% as unimportant. This perception among people living in informal settlements aligns with Nussbaum's (2011) proposition that all central human functional capabilities are important for a flourishing and dignified life.

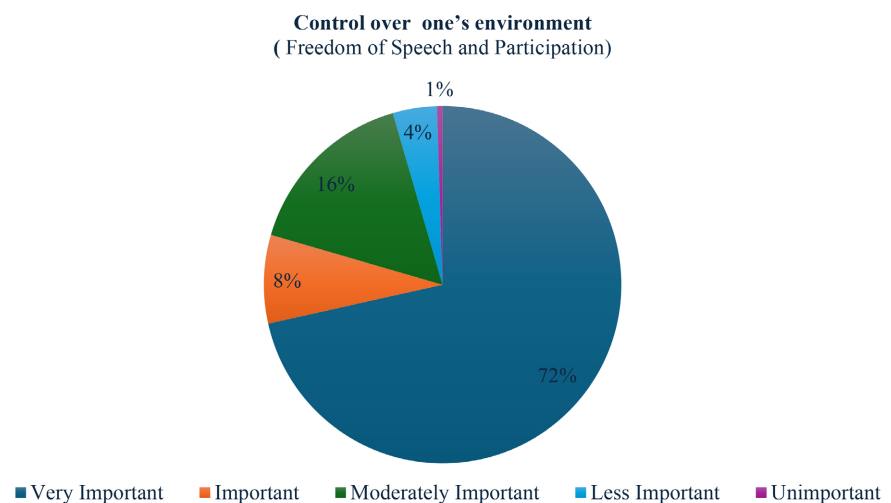


Figure 2. Control over one's environment as a capability for poverty reduction.

While participation is highly valued, many respondents reported low engagement due to limited resources and conversion factors.

5.3.1. Resources

Most residents lack resources, such as money, food, and water, which play a significant role as enablers for participation. Opportunity costs, such as lost income from missing work, discourage participation in community meetings and unpaid activities.

“We are breadwinners. We cannot attend activities that do not reward.” [Male Focus Group Participant]

Although every human being is homo economicus, men are culturally regarded as providers. This inherent need for economic power forces men to prioritize economic activities over other activities. In some cases, some NGOs provide incentives for participation, such as food and transport. However, this form of incentivized participation is often unsustainable and may lead to dependency syndrome.

5.3.2. Conversion Factors

Personal, social, and environmental factors, referred to as “conversion factors” in the Capability Approach (Sen, 1999), significantly influence participation. Age, marital status, and education level all shape one’s ability to engage in public life. For example, married women often attend meetings briefly due to domestic responsibilities. Moreover, linguistic and digital literacy barriers limit access to information, especially when communications are issued in English or via text.

“Some of us cannot read English, so we miss meeting messages.” [Focus Group Participant]

Social structures, including leadership roles and gender dynamics, play a significant role in limiting participation. The major drawback is that residents of informal settlements depend on external structures for economic and social activities. These structures are defined by the urban authorities and the dominant formal communities. Formal communities often subdue the voices of those in informal settlements. The study shows that various environmental issues, such as a lack of meeting spaces and harsh weather, also deter participation, especially for vulnerable groups such as the elderly and chronically ill. Despite these barriers, residents demonstrate resilience, innovation, and a desire for inclusion, using limited resources creatively to enhance their capabilities.

5.4. Important Domains of Participation for Poverty Reduction in Informal Settlements

Table 4 presents household survey responses regarding the importance of participation in various domains, such as social activities, education and skills development, economic work, and community decision-making, for poverty reduction in informal settlements.

Table 4. Importance of participation for poverty reduction.

Participation Area	Unimportant	Less Important	Moderately Important	Important	Very Important
Social activities	0%	0.4%	7.8%	17.3%	74.5%
Community decision-making	0%	0.8%	8.2%	17.3%	73.7%
Education and skills development	0%	0.8%	8.2%	15.6%	75.3%
Economic work	0%	0.4%	9.1%	15.6%	74.9%

Source: Author (2025).

5.4.1. Participation in Social Activities

The results show that 74.5% of the household respondents consider participation in social activities as “very important” for poverty reduction. These activities, including sports, clubs, gatherings, and religious events, foster social cohesion and mobility within diverse communities. The 30 - 39 and 40 - 49 age groups reported the highest participation rates, often within their settlements, due to spatial stigma and mobility constraints. While integration with formal neighbourhoods is limited, younger residents report attending nightclubs as a means of social engagement without fear of discrimination.

“Churches help us integrate... It was difficult in the past, but we are settling with people from different language backgrounds.” [Female Focus Group Participant]

Religious participation is particularly valued, with 77.8% involved in religious practices.

“Sometimes we need to leave everything to God... There is nothing we can do to change our poverty situation. We inherited this place, we will leave it to our children.” [Male Focus Group Participant]

A prolonged stay in poor conditions has made some residents pessimistic about their role in reducing poverty.

5.4.2. Participation in Collective Decision-Making

Participation in decision-making is one way of exercising political control, as outlined by Nussbaum (2011), which involves the capability to control one’s environment. Nearly three-quarters (73.7%) of respondents consider participation in community-level decision-making to be “very important”. Inclusive decision-making platforms, such as councils and political meetings, are essential for transparency and community cohesion. However, many expressed concerns about being excluded from critical decisions and being manipulated by local leaders or political actors. People living in informal settlements view participation in planning and decision-making as tokenistic through consultations and assessments. Many residents feel that stakeholders do not adequately represent their views and that everything is pre-planned.

“We would appreciate being informed, rather than hearing rumours and seeing things happen without any information.” [Focus Group Participant]

The mere fact that they are regarded as illegal residents who should be evicted disempowers them. Community leaders are often not recognised or listened to by all stakeholders, as they are not democratically elected by all residents and do not fit into the council’s authority structure.

“They work with us when they want something, or us to control the community otherwise or mobilise the communities.” [Community leader]

Paradoxically, citizens reported feeling coerced into participating in voting activities during national and municipal elections. Several participants noted that they are provided with food or monetary incentives to encourage others in their localities to endorse particular political parties. This indicates a type of instrumental participation, where involvement is not based on democratic inclusion or agency but is instead motivated by external political goals that exploit the vulnerabilities of inhabitants in informal settlements.

5.4.3. Participation in Education and Skills Development

Education and skills development are highly valued, with 75.3% ranking them as “very important” for poverty reduction. The education level is regarded as very important at the post-secondary level, which provides the minimum requirement for formal job entry, such as five Ordinary Level certificates or equivalent skills certification. Even though the education system has been liberalised with the emergence of multiple private schools and colleges, the respondents identified a lack of resources, such as financial means to pay fees and distances to the educational centres, primarily in cities, as the primary barriers.

“We value completing O-level education as it is the minimum requirement for one to get a job, but we have challenges paying fees, and schools are far from our places.” [Focus Group Participant]

Participation in educational opportunities is not only about skill acquisition, but also builds self-confidence, counters stigma, and enhances access to other capabilities.

5.4.4. Participation in Economic Activities

Human beings are *homo-economicus*; hence, everyone pursues wealth for their self-interest, and participation in economic activities is linked to this pursuit. Participation in livelihood activities is considered essential for survival, with 74.9% rating it as “very important”. The most common forms of economic work include waste-picking (51.4%), casual labour (29.6%), vending (7.4%), and illegal mining (4.1%). Employment trends vary by age, with younger residents more likely to be involved in waste-picking and older individuals more likely to be in casual work. The physical nature of better-paying jobs, such as gold mining and construction work, is often dominated by men, while women are often excluded from economic participation.

“There are roles we cannot do, like digging in the mine.” [Female Focus Group Participant]

The context provided above makes it difficult for economic participation to thrive in informal settlements. Economic power is essential in relation to external buyers, traders, and employers.

“It is difficult to negotiate the prices of your products, buyers set prices. Waste pickers often have limited options due to the market’s constraints.”

Several NGOs undertake capacity-building initiatives targeting waste management. However, buyers control the market.

6. Discussion

In response to urban poverty and vulnerability to hazards in informal settlements, states and NGOs often apply resource-based approaches. However, the resource-based approaches often portray residents of informal settlements as passive victims of poverty and exclusion, unable to respond effectively to environmental, economic, or social shocks. While such communities face significant resource deficits and exposure to hazards (Mutsaa & Magidimisha, 2021), deficit-based perspectives risk oversimplifying the structural and mobility-related drivers of urban poverty.

Framing poverty solely in terms of material deprivation or as an individual failure obscures its socially constructed and institutionally reinforced nature. Addae-Korankye (2019) noted that exclusionary policies, spatial segregation, and barriers to participation are some well-documented mechanisms sustaining urban poverty. Approaches such as the Capability Approach offer a people-centred framework emphasising freedom, agency, and meaningful participation in urban life (Hammock, 2019). This perspective is particularly relevant in contexts where agency and participation across social, economic, and political spheres are central to reducing marginalisation and fostering urban resilience (Gaillard et al., 2019).

The primary determinant of participation in informal settlements is power, defined by resources and social structures. Individual and collective action to reduce poverty often fails as the people in the affected community are not consulted. In Kenya, Slum Dwellers International (2022) noted that resident-centered solutions are more successful where residents are involved in all stages. Most people in informal settlements feel that their low socio-economic status prompts the state and NGOs to view them as passive victims and that their participation is tokenistic. The physical counterpower, such as settling on private land without tenure, is not sustainable, as the state can exercise its disciplinary power by arresting them. This study shows that the will to exercise counterpower, such as resistance and social movements, is hindered by the conflation of politics and the legal system, making it difficult to make inroads.

The socio-economic status stemming from residential illegality and exclusion further defines the kind and amount of power residents wield. Political power is concentrated at the higher levels of the social hierarchy, such as in the state and local authorities. Contrary to Foucault’s (1976) view that power is everywhere, to people in informal settlements, it resides in different levels of the social hierarchy.

Power is stratified, and depending on the context, it may concentrate in different domains, such as national government, local government, community leaders, household heads, or individuals. Also, power is perceived as political, social, and economic. It follows a social hierarchy, and resources are never shared equally.

Although political power is concentrated at higher levels of government, residents of informal settlements exercise some political agency when voting for their national and political representatives. While this is one of the ways of exercising counterpower, they have limited breakthroughs due to their inability to effect political change, as they are a small part of a larger constituency.

People in informal settlements value participation for several reasons, including fostering social cohesion and challenging territorial stigma. Interaction between residents of formal and informal settlements through community sports, cultural events, or clubs helps challenge stereotypes and build shared urban identities (Kearns et al., 2017). However, limited access to resources such as food, water, and clothes also makes it difficult for residents in informal contexts to participate in social, political, and economic activities. People living in informal settlements struggle to exercise their rights despite these rights being articulated in Article 13 of the Zimbabwe Constitution (Government of Zimbabwe, 2013c). According to the participants, decision-making is a political process, and it is largely those in the upper social hierarchy whose voices are heard.

Religious gatherings serve as important social and emotional support systems, particularly during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Dyrness, 2021). While spiritual frameworks can foster solidarity (Chikwa et al., 2022), fatalistic beliefs may also deter proactive engagement in economic and civic life (Hakim, 2019; Cidade et al., 2015). Some households expressed a sense of resignation and pessimism, ascribing their circumstances to divine forces. Fatalism may limit proactive economic engagement (Hakim, 2019; Okyerefo & Fiaveh, 2016). This reflects adaptive preferences (Terlazzo, 2022), a phenomenon that occurs due to prolonged deprivation, leading people to lower their optimism about the future.

Their legal precarity shapes their external engagement and constrains their political and economic agency. A lack of voter registration requirements hinders participation in political activities, including national and local elections. If, somehow, they obtain the necessary documents, their participation is often symbolic. There is often a lack of political will (Lungani Makhaye et al., 2021) to support poor residents to be able to shape their future, as most of the politicians seem comfortable when they keep their constituency on the lower rungs of the Arnstein ladder of participation. Poverty forces them to accept food, money, and clothes in exchange for political support, a clientelism form that reinforces dependency and disempowerment. Economic participation depends on one's ability to work hard and compete for opportunities. Economic participation is a route to dignity and autonomy; this pursuit is impeded by the spatial and systemic discrimination in this settlement (Zanoni et al., 2023; Berkey, 2020).

A lack of formal recognition, particularly for leaders and diverse internal dy-

namics, often hinders the collective agency of informal communities. [Mwamba and Peng \(2020\)](#) emphasised community facilitation that stimulates self-help and a sense of pragmatism within the community. While community meetings offer informational and psychosocial benefits, structural challenges such as limited transportation, digital connectivity, and food insecurity often hinder participation. These practical barriers are mediated by personal, social, and environmental “conversion factors” that determine the translation of resources into capabilities ([Sen, 1999](#)). Age, gender, education, and access to identity documents influence participation levels ([Mutune et al., 2015](#)). Structural stigma and gendered labour norms further limit inclusion.

In CA, power is associated with the capability that one has to act upon the environment, such as social, political, and economic dimensions ([Sen, 1999](#)). For people in informal settlements, the decision-making power is influenced by their context and their lived experiences. The type and level of participation are shaped by access to resources and their ability to convert resources into other capabilities ([Robeyns, 2017](#)). In urban areas, materialism defines the social hierarchies and the level of influence one has over one’s environment. The quality and quantity of resources define one’s degree of participation and the level of influence in collective decision processes. Low resources often mean people are on the lower rungs of the citizen participation ladder, making them vulnerable to manipulation. By contrast, those with greater resources and higher levels of education are deemed capable of converting their resources to counter power and are often on higher rungs of Arnstein’s Citizen participation ladder.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study underscores the importance of individual and collective participation as foundational capabilities for poverty reduction in informal settlements. The study shows that participation should always be accompanied by transparency to prevent participation fatigue. All residents of the informal settlements have aspirations and perceive active participation as an opportunity to enhance agency, disrupt fatalistic attitudes, and challenge stigma and discrimination. Despite hope in informal settlements, social, spatial, and structural barriers inhibit meaningful participation and, subsequently, the attainment of capabilities for poverty reduction.

The study recommends integrating participation into urban sustainability frameworks and policies. Local authorities need to recognize participation as part of the urban development agenda and a core capability. The engagement platforms must be tailored to residents’ spatial, economic, and social realities. There is a need for coordination and collaboration between central and local authorities in the exercise of their sovereign power, and they should allow for counterpower to be exercised by vulnerable communities.

Local authorities and NGOs should invest in participation-enabling infrastructure, such as roads, communication networks, and transport subsidies, and estab-

lish accessible local meeting spaces to lower participation barriers. Urban programmes should integrate and mainstream age, gender, and other social characteristics, providing inclusive support mechanisms. The study recognises that meetings and consultations are inadequate as they are often tokenistic; to ensure participation, stakeholders should strive to transfer decision-making power to the poor residents of informal settlements.

To address the lack of trust and transparency, national and local governments, as well as NGOs, should strive to promote transparency when interacting with residents of informal settlements. There is a need for transparency in dealing with people in informal settlements. The economic situation in Zimbabwe affects everyone, but not equally; hence, there is a need to have special consideration for poor communities such as those in informal settlements. Enhanced transparency will rebuild trust and reduce participation fatigue. The study also recommends the fostering of urban cohesion through shared economic and social activities. Integration with formal areas is important to people living in informal settlements. Sports, art, and faith-based events can encourage inclusion and reduce stigma and discrimination.

Limitations

This study employed non-random sampling techniques, which have certain limitations. Since the sample was selected through convenience sampling, the sample may not be wide and representative of the broader population of informal settlements. Hence, findings cannot be generalized with statistical confidence to all poor informal settlements beyond Bulawayo. Thus, the results are context-specific insights and perceptions within the studied area. Social desirability bias may not be ruled out, as some respondents may have provided responses they felt were expected rather than their candid lived experience.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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