

BASIC SERVICES SUPPORT HUMAN CAPABILITIES

*How Water and Electricity
Shape Women's Livelihoods in
South African Townships*



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Photographs: Bram Lammers

Acronyms

ECD	Early childhood centre
FBS	Free basic services
HBE	Home Based Enterprise
KWh	Kilowatt hour
Kl	Kilolitre
LED	Local economic development
MTLC	Minimum Threshold Level of Consumption
NEP	National Electrification Programme
NDP	National Development Plan
RDP	Reconstruction and Development Programme

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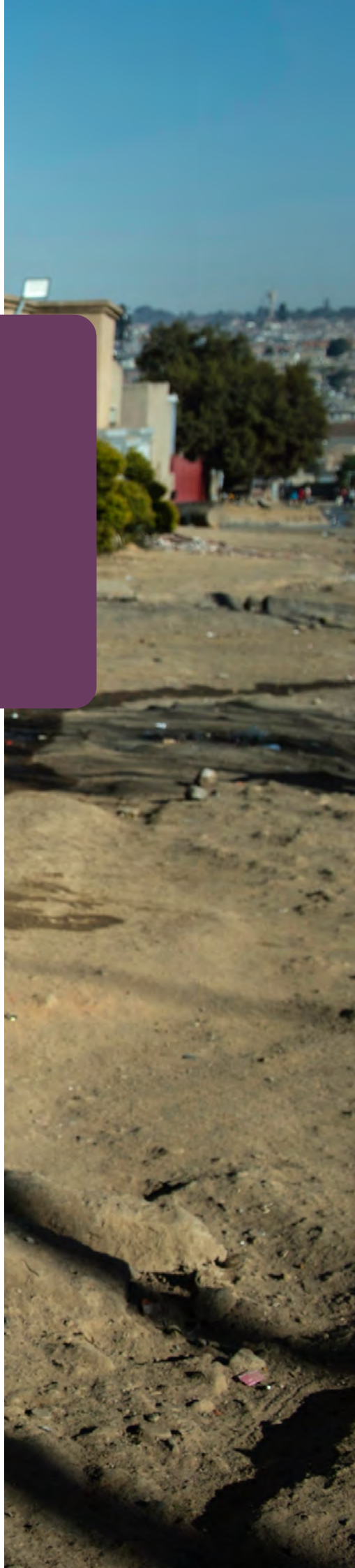
CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

Before sunrise, Petunia is usually preparing **kota** (filled quarter loaf of bread) and **amagwinya** (fatcakes) for school children and other customers in Ivory Park. Her business depends on electricity, but frequent power cuts often prevent her from cooking during the critical morning hours. When this happens, she loses a day's income before her business has even opened. As both a business owner and caregiver, the consequences extend beyond lost sales. They affect her ability to provide for her household.

Petunia's experience reflects the challenges faced by many women in low-income townships. Unreliable and unaffordable access to water and electricity does not simply disrupt daily routines; it limits women's ability to earn an income, care for their families and pursue opportunities that improve their lives.

This report draws on the lived experiences of women living in South African townships to demonstrate the critical role that water and electricity play in enabling human capabilities. It brings capability theory into conversation with the everyday realities of life in townships, highlighting how access to basic services shapes opportunities for wellbeing, livelihood generation and social participation. For women operating Home-Based Enterprises (HBEs), access to reliable and affordable water and electricity is not simply a matter of service delivery. These services expand capabilities by enabling income generation, reducing the time and labour associated with unpaid care work, supporting household wellbeing and creating greater opportunities to exercise agency. Conversely, unreliable or unaffordable services constrain these capabilities, limiting both economic opportunities and quality of life.



1.1 Background

Access to basic services such as electricity and water is central to enabling livelihoods,¹ particularly in townships where unemployment is high and many residents rely on HBEs to generate income.²

South Africa's informal economy plays a significant role in employment and livelihood generation, accounting for 19.5 per cent of total employment in the fourth quarter of 2024.³ The sector is largely concentrated in the trade, construction, finance and community and social services industries, with nearly one-third of informal economic activity located in Gauteng. Black Africans constituted 88.9 per cent of informal business owners in 2023, while 28 per cent of informal businesses operated from the owner's home.⁴

Women are particularly reliant on the sector, with 59 per cent of female informal business owners identifying unemployment as the primary reason for starting their businesses.⁵ The informal economy therefore serves as an important mechanism for poverty alleviation and income generation in low-income communities, particularly for women-headed households.

Section 27(1)(b) of the South African Constitution guarantees everyone the right of access to sufficient water, while section 27(2) obliges the state to take reasonable legislative and other measures, within its available resources, to progressively realise this right. In operationalising this constitutional mandate, South Africa defines a minimum basic water supply standard as 25 litres per person per day, with access located within 200 metres of a household. Although this threshold is intended to secure basic needs such as drinking, food preparation and personal hygiene, it remains insufficient to sustain a fully healthy and productive life.

Municipalities are responsible for ensuring the provision of basic services, including water and electricity, to indigent households through the free basic services (FBS) policy, which aims to subsidise low-income households that cannot afford essential services. The current allocation provides 6 kl of free basic water (FBW) each month.⁶

While the South African government does not have a standalone constitutional duty to provide electricity directly to households, access to electricity is widely recognised as a critical driver of human development. Legislation and case law have shown that electricity is a condition for the exercise of other rights, including the rights to human dignity and access to adequate housing, water and healthcare.⁷ The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) explicitly linked electricity access to both shelter and livelihoods, stating that 'energy is a basic need and vital input into the informal sector'.⁸

Reflecting this developmental role, the National Electrification Programme (NEP), which expanded electricity access to historically underserved black communities after apartheid, was implemented through the RDP. The introduction of the FBE policy in 2003⁹ further strengthened the connection between electricity access and human development by recognising that electrification must be provided in sufficient quantities to improve wellbeing. Similarly, the National Development Plan (NDP)¹⁰ identifies electricity as 'a prerequisite for social development'. These policy commitments acknowledge that electricity is not only essential for meeting household needs but also for enabling productive activities and supporting livelihoods, including small and home-based enterprises.¹¹ The current allocation of free basic electricity (FBE) is 50 kWh per household per month.¹²

1 Thompson (ed.)(2001).

2 Modiba (2024).

3 StatsSA, 'What do South African Households Look Like?'

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 DWAf (2002).

7 *Joseph and Others v City of Johannesburg and Others* (CCT 43/09) [2009] ZACC.

8 RDP (1994).

9 DME (2003).

10 NPC (2012).

11 Prasad and Dieden (2007).

12 DME (2003).

Despite the post-apartheid commitment to universal access to basic services as a mechanism for reducing poverty and inequality, access to reliable, affordable and quality services remains highly uneven across South African communities. Households in townships and other low-income areas continue to experience frequent electricity outages,¹³ water interruptions, inadequate sanitation and deteriorating infrastructure, often at far higher rates than wealthier areas. At the same time, poorer households are less able to absorb rising service costs¹⁴ or secure alternative forms of supply such as generators, solar energy, boreholes or private water delivery. Although housing conditions may differ across settlement types, low-income households face similar challenges in accessing essential basic services. This creates a structural contradiction in which those most dependent on public services are also the least likely to access them in reliable and affordable forms.

As a result, the redistributive and developmental role envisaged for universal basic services is not being fully realised. Instead, inadequate and unaffordable service provision is increasingly reinforcing existing patterns of poverty and inequality, with particularly severe consequences for women, who often bear the disproportionate burden of managing household survival and carrying out unpaid care work during service disruptions.

These shortcomings not only undermine women's ability to fulfil domestic responsibilities but also constrain their capacity to operate HBEs, which are often critical sources of household income. Limited access to essential services such as water, sanitation, and lighting disproportionately affects women, who are often the primary caregivers and household managers.¹⁵ These service gaps have a direct and daily impact on their ability to care for families, manage household tasks and engage in productive activities, further entrenching gendered inequalities in low-income communities.

1.2 Research aim

This research seeks to highlight the importance of gender- and domestic-conscious service delivery that recognises the dual role of women as both caregivers and owners of HBEs operating from their homes. In this context, basic service provision must be reliable and affordable to support households that depend on these essential services for both domestic and livelihood purposes, thereby enabling the expansion of their capabilities.

This report draws on the capability approach to examine the relationship between access to basic services and women's ability to improve their living conditions.

In response, women rely on social networks and collective forms of support to sustain their households and livelihoods. This perspective resonates with the African philosophy of *ubuntu*, which understands human flourishing as fundamentally shaped by relationships of care, reciprocity and mutual support.

To explore these dynamics, the research asks the following questions:

1. What factors contribute to the realisation of capabilities of women running HBEs in townships?
2. How do women navigate the intersecting demands of income generation and care work under conditions of water and electricity insecurity?

1.3 Outline of this report

The report is organised into seven chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the research and context which validates the need to understand basic services as essential for realising capabilities. Chapter 2 outlines the research methodology, while Chapter 3 introduces the conceptual framework used to understand basic services as essential for capabilities. Chapters 4 and 5 examine how water and electricity shape women's livelihoods and wellbeing. Chapter 6 explores the home as a site of both care and production, highlighting the intersecting demands placed on women. Lastly, Chapter 7 provides a conclusion and recommendations.

¹³ Maggott et al. (2022).

¹⁴ Ledger and Mathibela (2025).

¹⁵ Singh (2024).





CHAPTER 2:

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach to examine how access to water and electricity shapes home-run productive activities in township contexts in South Africa, with a particular focus on women's economic activities.

2.1 Contextual analysis

The research was conducted in two Johannesburg townships – Cosmo City and Ivory Park – where informal and home-based economic activities are common and closely tied to the availability of basic services:

Cosmo City is a post-apartheid suburb developed in the early 2000s as a planned mixed-income settlement. With a population of 120,140,¹⁶ the area was designed to promote spatial integration, and it combines subsidised housing, bonded homes, rental accommodation and informal dwellings within a single neighbourhood. Residents represent a range of income groups, making Cosmo City an important example of efforts to create more spatially and financially inclusive urban settlements in post-apartheid South Africa. Black Africans make up 97 per cent of the population.¹⁷

Ivory Park is a large township, housing 184,383 residents.¹⁸ The township was established during the apartheid era to accommodate black African households. Located near Midrand, it is home to predominantly low- and middle-income residents and includes a mix of formal housing, backyard rental accommodation and informal settlements. Many households rely on informal employment and small businesses for income, while continuing to face challenges related to poverty, unemployment, and unreliable service delivery. Black Africans make up 99 per cent of the population.¹⁹

¹⁶ City Facts, 'Cosmo City, Gauteng, South Africa'.

¹⁷ Frith, 'Cosmo City: Sub Place 798022002 from Census 2011'.

¹⁸ City Population, 'Ivory Park: Main Place in City of Johannesburg'.

¹⁹ Frith, 'Ivory Park: Main Place 798006 from Census 2011'.

2.2 Research methods

Research data was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 18 residents engaged in activities such as running spaza shops, hair salons and small food businesses from their homes. Data was also collected through video interviews which allowed me to capture the real emotions and frustrations women grapple with daily. While I fall into the same racial category and speak the same language as the interviewees, our initial interactions suffered significant communication barriers because I had no previous relationship with the respondents. Given this constraint, I carefully devised research instruments that would encourage communication.

After completing the initial participant observation phase and piloting the interview questions with a small number of HBE owners, it became clear that working alongside a field researcher based in the area would strengthen the research process. The field researcher helped build trust with residents, making them more comfortable and willing to participate in interviews. He introduced me to HBE owners with whom he had established long-standing relationships, after which additional participants were identified through snowball sampling. Where this approach was unsuccessful due to the unavailability of potential interviewees, we used purposive sampling, approaching HBEs that were visible while walking through the area. These included businesses operating from homes with signage displayed on exterior walls, as well as enterprises operating from pavements and other public spaces.

While the majority of participants were women – reflecting the central role they play in sustaining household economies – some men were also interviewed. Including both groups made it possible to not only centre women's lived experiences, but also to capture how men observe and understand the ways in which unreliable or unaffordable services disrupt women's businesses and daily work.

The interviews were conducted in a conversational manner at women's homes and business sites, allowing participants to speak openly about their routines, challenges and coping strategies. Discussions focused on how water and electricity are used in their businesses, what happens when services are interrupted, how much households spend on utilities and how people adapt to rising costs and unreliable supply. The data was analysed thematically, focusing on the relationship between the availability of services, the reliability and affordability of access and the extent to which these enable or constrain livelihood opportunities.

Table 1 summarises the 18 research participants, their locations and principal livelihood activities. Pseudonyms are used throughout the report to ensure anonymity.



Table 1: Brief details of the 18 research participants

Participant	Livelihood / activity	Income / scale	Household / business context	Monthly Water cost	Monthly Electricity cost
IVORY PARK					
Nkati	Fruit and vegetable trader	R50–R120 per day	Mother; rents accommodation	Included in rent	R300–R350
Nhlanhla	Hairdresser	Below R1,000 per month	Rents locally and rents salon space elsewhere; occasionally employs two assistants	Not stated	Not stated
Rose	Kota business	Around R500 in weekly sales	Operates from rented premises; employs one assistant	Included in rent	R800
Hlamu	Seamstress	Not stated	Works from her rented home	Not stated	Not stated
Tito	Barber	Around R600 per week	Principal tenant of a salon; employs two assistants	Not stated	Not stated
Floyd	Assists with family kota business and backroom rentals	Kota business up to R3,500 per month	Two-parent household; business employs an assistant	Costs covered by his father	R500
Nkateko	Spaza shop	Around R2,500 per month in sales	Operates from front of yard; younger brother assists; husband employed	Costs covered by husband	Costs covered by husband
Bab'Patrick	Pensioner; rents a shack to a barber	Not stated	Relies on pension income; landlord to a small business	Not stated, inconsistent meter readings	R700–R800
Bab'Nkosi	Pensioner owning a spaza shop	Up to R10,000 a month	Relies on pension income and income from his shop	R200	R400–R500
Mam'Zandi	Crèche	Around R3,750 per month	Employs four teaching assistants; also relies on pension income	Not stated	R600–R1,000
Cebile	Spaza shop	Up to R15,000 per month	Business described as doing well	Not stated	R1,000
Ma' Hlongwane	Sells chicken intestines; rents backrooms	Not stated	Household income comes from food sales and rental income	Not stated	Not stated
Petunia	Kota and fat-cake business	Not stated	Early-morning trader serving school children	Not stated	Not stated
Rhandzu	Subsistence farmer	Not stated	Grows food and sells produce to neighbours	Included in rent	R300
Noah	Barber	Not stated	Running a salon where he is the anchor tenant	Included in rent	R600
COSMO CITY					
Sue	Laundromat employee	Not stated	Single mother	Included in rent	Included in rent
Sizwe	Public transport driver	Not stated	Resident and service provider	Included in rent	Included in rent
Sphe	Cook at a kota establishment	Not stated	Also responsible for household and childcare tasks	Did not pay for water, meters were being installed at the time of the interview	Costs covered by husband



CHAPTER 3:

'SOCIALISED' CAPABILITIES: A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING LIVELIHOODS IN SOUTH AFRICA



Mam'Zandi runs a creche in Ivory Park which helps needy families with childcare so that mothers have some time to 'hustle', and only charges a third of the local monthly creche fee. Her passion for running a social enterprise which uplifts women in her community shows that her business approach is influenced by principles of ubuntu and motherhood.

This chapter develops a conceptual framework which draws on the capability approach, Ubuntu and human development literature to position basic services as resources that enable or hinder capabilities.

3.1 What is the capability approach?

The capability approach is a framework developed by Amartya Sen that considers subjective wellbeing as an essential component of economic development, thus prioritising the lives people value so that they can excel and overcome poverty. In the context of this research, this means distinguishing between formal access to basic services and the extent to which women are actually able to use those services to improve their lives. While the capability approach encompasses a broad range of values and freedoms, this research focuses specifically on the value that reliable and affordable access to basic services adds to women's ability to fulfil their domestic responsibilities, including care work, and to operate home-based enterprises (HBEs).

Capabilities are central to understanding and addressing poverty, inequality, justice and development. They are the real freedoms people have access to in order to allow them to pursue and realise a life they value. That is, capabilities are a means to an end.²⁰ Linked to this are 'functionings', which are the things a person manages to do or be (such as being healthy, educated or securely housed). Capabilities refer to the genuine opportunities and choices available to achieve these states.²¹ Thus, quality of life is determined not by the resources a person holds, but by their actual ability to live a life they have reason to value.

The capability approach therefore does not define deprivation simply as a lack of income, but rather as the absence of the real freedoms and capabilities needed to lead a valued life, including access quality education, healthcare, secure housing and energy. Inequality, in turn, arises when social and institutional arrangements unequally expand or restrict these capabilities across groups. Structural barriers such as inadequate public services, gender bias or spatial exclusion systematically limit the freedoms of some, while enhancing those of others.

Building on the work of Sen, Nussbaum advances a more normative and justice-oriented version of the approach, also introducing a gendered lens.²² She frames poverty as a **failure of basic human capabilities**, and inequality as a **violation of human dignity** that occurs when people cannot achieve essential functionings required for a fully human life.²³ From this perspective, reducing poverty requires public policy to secure **minimum capability thresholds** for all individuals, ensuring that everyone can live with dignity and participate meaningfully in society.

3.2 From individual to 'socialised' capabilities

South African policy has framing around 'human capabilities' to provide guidelines on human development in the country, notably through the National Development Plan (NDP), which sets various developmental goals for the country to achieve by 2030.²⁴ The NDP explains that the national goal of building a developmental state will rely heavily on people's capabilities to improve their own lives, with the state playing an intermediary role of correcting historical injustices. The country's approach recognises access to housing, water, sanitation and electricity (among others) as essential components of achieving a decent standard of living.

The NDP considers women's equality as one of the critical components to ensuring that South Africa meets its developmental strategy. It emphasises that secure access to basic services is not only about welfare provision but is a prerequisite for expanding women's capabilities and sustaining their ability to earn a living:

Social, cultural, religious and educational barriers to women entering the job market should be addressed. Concrete measures should be put in place and the results should be evaluated over time. Access to safe drinking water, electricity and quality early childhood education, for example, could free women from doing unpaid work and help them seek jobs (NDP, 2013).²⁵

However, this vision has not materialised for women in townships. With just four years remaining until the NDP's target year, the persistent lack of access to services disrupts women's capabilities, undermining their prospects for improved livelihoods and making exclusion appear entrenched rather than temporary.

The application of the capability approach in South Africa warrants additional contextual reflection. Ubuntu-informed perspectives²⁶ emphasise relationality, interdependence and socially embedded wellbeing, challenging the individualistic tendencies often associated with capability theory. From this standpoint, capabilities are not solely individual attributes but are co-constituted through social relations and community structures. Thinking about capabilities as socialised aligns with African philosophical traditions, particularly the concept of ubuntu, expressed in the proverb *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a person is a person through other people). This reflects the idea that human existence is deeply embedded in relationships with others, grounded in solidarity, compassion and reciprocity. Accordingly, even where

20 Sen (1999).

21 Ibid.

22 Nussbaum (2000).

23 Nussbaum (2011).

24 NPC (2012).

25 NPC (2012) pp. 470–71.

26 Hoffmann and Metz (2017).

improvements in living conditions enable the expansion of capabilities, these processes are not separate from community-centred forms of social life.

Ubuntu recognises a person's existence as deeply connected to 'community', and this was a recurring principle that the women who were interviewed embodied.²⁷ While productive work is mainly about income generation and the survival of women-led households, these businesses also rely on social networks to thrive. Women entrepreneurs have taken an ubuntu-driven approach to running their businesses.

For example, in MaHlongwane's section of Ivory Park which had been without electricity for over six months, residents relied on neighbours from nearby areas with uninterrupted supply to charge their phones.

Tito is a tenant in Ivory Park and the principal tenant of a local salon where he works as a barber. Earning approximately R600 per week, he has expanded his business sufficiently to employ two assistants. His livelihood depends on both electricity and water for hair-cutting and washing services.

Tito demonstrates ubuntu by sharing his salon space with a seamstress who was unable to work due to power cuts in her area. Although this arrangement involved a small fee, his willingness to accommodate her reflects a broader ethic of mutual support. And a lady selling *amagwinya* on the side of the road shared that she gives unsold food to the creche so that the children can have something to eat.

These unconventional ways of running a business, show the instrumental role played by ubuntu in helping women improve their living conditions through running home-based enterprises. This offers unique ways of thinking about operationalising ubuntu and the contributions it can make to human development.

3.3 Building a case for basic services and human development

Affordable and consistent access to water and electricity is central to poverty reduction, gender equality, and to expanding human capabilities and unlocking the developmental potential of women. Both are not only essential for health and household wellbeing but also for productive uses that sustain livelihoods.

From a capability perspective, access to these services expands people's real freedoms to convert effort and skill into meaningful outcomes – such as growing food, running home-based enterprises or pursuing education. For poor women in particular, reliable and affordable access to water and energy can transform their economic participation by reducing time spent on unpaid domestic work and enabling income-generating activities. Conversely, when access is limited to minimal domestic needs, people's capabilities are constrained, perpetuating poverty and deepening social inequalities.

Therefore Mbano-Mweso's (2020) proposed 'domestic-plus'²⁸ approach to the supply of water to households which prioritises both domestic and livelihood needs is fundamental.

This research stresses that in addition to both needs being recognised, 'access' should be considered holistically where it encompasses physical access where women have uninterrupted service connections, but also more importantly financial freedom to afford to make water and electricity purchases. This framing complements the capability framework's goal of expanding real opportunities for wellbeing by shifting focus from meeting basic needs to enhancing human capabilities and addressing the structural roots of gendered poverty and inequality.

The next chapter examines how unreliable and unaffordable water provision undermines capabilities.

²⁷ Mbiti (1990).

²⁸ Mbano-Mweso (2020).

CHAPTER 4:

'The Water One Is Worse Than Electricity': WATER SHEDDING AND THE EROSION OF PRODUCTIVE CAPABILITIES

Rhandzu lost access to piped water in 2024 after neighbouring residents from the formal housing section of her neighbourhood cut her connection. She now collects water from a stream which is an unsafe and a time-consuming process that limits her ability to maintain her vegetable garden.

Water insecurity is shaped not only by service provision but also by the social and economic conditions that determine how people access and use water in everyday life.

Inconsistent access not only disrupts domestic routines but also stalls income-generating activities, both in households and the wider community.²⁹ This is the case for activities that depend on water for cleaning, hygiene, and product preparation.

Rose runs a small kota business from rented premises. Her business generates around R500 in weekly sales and provides employment for one assistant. As a food vendor, she depends on both water and electricity for food preparation and storage.

Rose explained that inconsistent water supply forces her to close shop when stored reserves run out. She noted, 'The water one is worse than electricity.'

Rhandzu is a subsistence farmer who has been struggling to make ends meet since they started experiencing water challenges in her informal settlement.

Rhandzu said that while this has disrupted daily tasks such as cooking, it has also affected her ability to grow food to sell to her neighbours.

Noah operates a salon in Ivory Park. He said that he has to shut down his salon during water outages: 'When there's no water, I can't wash clients' hair. I close the shop.'

Bab'Nkosi operates a spaza shop in Ivory Park. He explained how sudden water reductions, often without notice, disrupted his daily business. On one occasion, he had to stop washing stock mid-task. He now pays young boys R100 daily to fetch water from neighbouring Ekurhuleni – money he cannot recover through business earnings.

29 Bennie et al. (2025).



4.1 Reliable, affordable and sufficient access to water

While capability thinking is well established in studies of energy poverty, its application to water rights is less developed. Mehta helps bridge this gap by linking capabilities to the right to water, emphasising that access must be safe, affordable and supportive of livelihoods.³⁰

Ledger calls for adopting a human-rights-based approach to water access, ensuring that every household has sufficient and affordable water to meet both domestic and livelihood needs.³¹ This research builds on Ledger's foundation by arguing that 'access' should be considered holistically, encompassing physical access (where women have uninterrupted service connections) and, more importantly, financial access – the ability to pay for water and electricity without having to forgo other household costs.

Affordability and billing practices can constrain residents' ability to benefit from water services, leaving many feeling trapped by rising costs and opaque charges.

Bab'Patrick is a pensioner who is renting out a shack in the front of his yard to a barber. He explained that it is very hard to afford to make frequent water and electricity purchases as a pensioner, so he uses candles and relies on assistance from his neighbours when there is no water.

Bab'Patrick highlighted that having enough water is important because his tenant needs water to continue operating his salon. Cebile runs a spaza shop in Ivory Park. Both he and Bab'Patrick noted how confusing or delayed water bills make it difficult to budget or plan. In some cases, residents have gone months without utility statements, undermining accountability and transparency.

Beyond its impact on households, limited access to water greatly affects access to education.

Nkati moved to Ivory Park in 2011 and rents accommodation there. She earns a modest income selling fruit and vegetables, making between R50 and R120 per day. As a mother and informal trader, she relies on water for washing produce and maintaining her household. Because her business is not electricity-intensive, power outages have a limited effect on her income, although they disrupt everyday family life.

Nkati emphasised how water shortages affect not just her household but the broader community, especially children who are sent home from school when there's no water to flush toilets or wash hands.

³⁰ Mehta (2014).

³¹ Ledger (2024).

4.2 Social relations and water security

Jepson et al. extend this argument by showing that water security depends not only on the availability of water, but also on the social relations that shape how water is secured and used. They propose a shift from a focus on securing water supply to one of fostering capabilities associated with water use.³²

These social dimensions become most visible under conditions of scarcity. When water provision is unreliable or unaffordable, households increasingly rely on collective strategies to sustain daily life and income-generating activities.

For example, small business owners described pooling resources to fund petrol for a neighbour who collects water from nearby towns using 25 litre containers. Bab'Patrick also explained that when there is no water he relies on assistance from his neighbours. While informal, such arrangements demonstrate how constrained access reshapes social organisation.

Extending this capabilities-oriented perspective, Egge and Ajibade³³ emphasise that water security must account for aspects of wellbeing that go beyond hydration and domestic use.

The next chapter conducts a similar analysis, identifying how poor access to electricity supports or hinders capabilities.

³² Jepson et al. (2017).

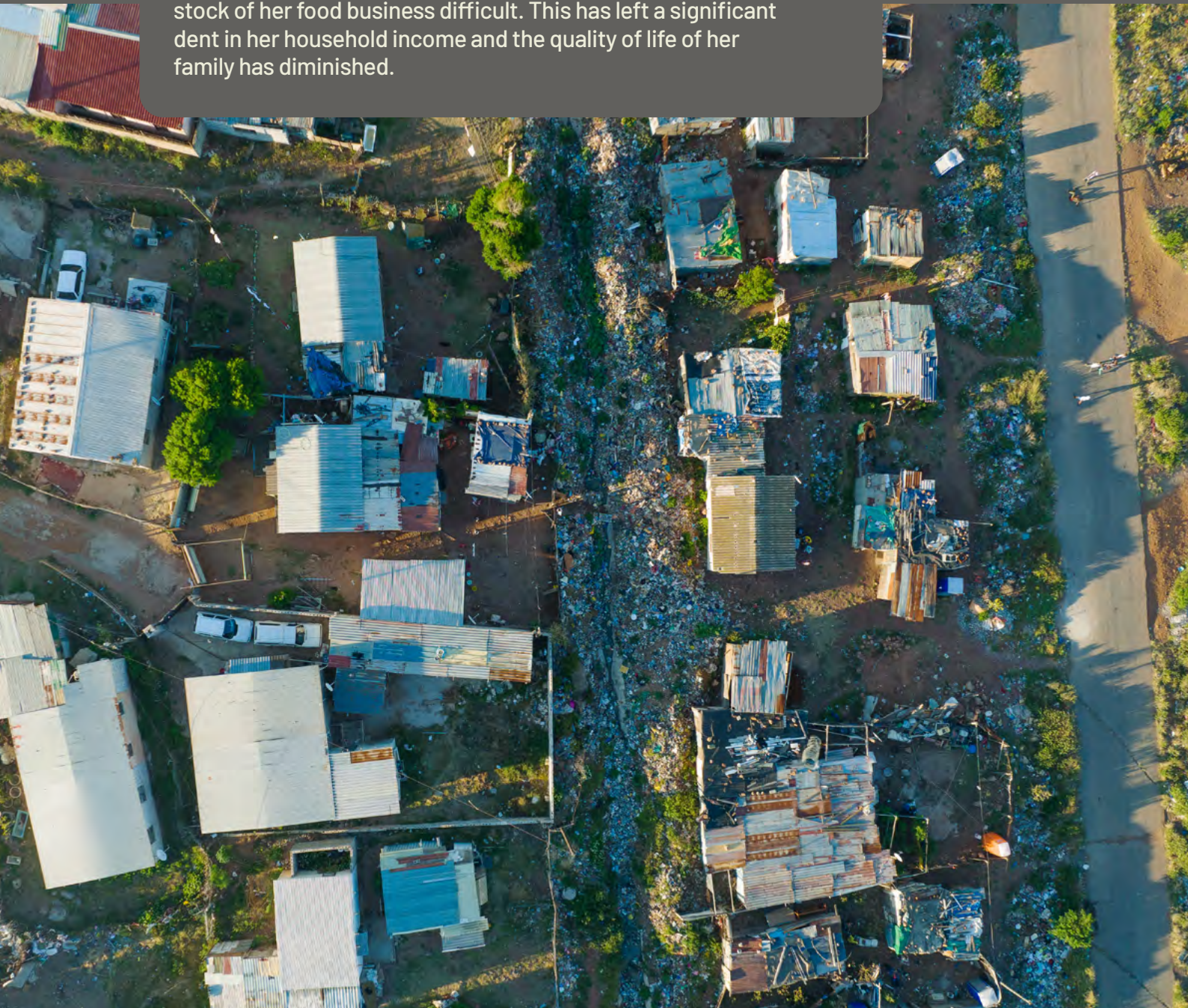
³³ Egge and Ajibade (2023).



CHAPTER 5:

'WHEN IT'S GONE IT'S GONE': ENERGY ACCESS AND THE CAPABILITY APPROACH

Ma'Hlongwane sells chicken intestines and has backrooms which she usually rents out to tenants. She explained that it is easier to manage not having water, but having ongoing electricity cuts (over a six-month period) has left her with no tenants for her backrooms and it has also made managing the stock of her food business difficult. This has left a significant dent in her household income and the quality of life of her family has diminished.



Both the affordability of electricity and its reliability have deteriorated over the years. Residents interviewed said that monthly electricity costs range from R250 to R1,000 – with most respondents noting significant tariff increases. In addition, load reduction and power cuts have damaged equipment (e.g. fridges) and forced business closures, resulting in income loss. Many people have turned to gas stoves and candles as coping mechanisms, though these come with additional costs and risks.

Nhlanhla relocated to Ivory Park in January 2025 and works as a hairdresser. She rents accommodation locally while also renting space in a salon located in a more affluent area. Although her income fluctuates and remains below R1,000 per month, she has built a small business that occasionally employs two assistants.

Nhlanhla's work depends almost entirely on electricity to power hairdressing equipment, making power interruptions a direct threat to her ability to earn an income. She noted, 'I just have to accept, I have no plan.' This illustrates the helplessness many feel.

5.1 Energy poverty

Bab'Nkosi explained how load reduction damaged his fridge's compressor, impacting stock storage. Noah has to halt operations during outages, explaining that he simply 'can't work without electricity'. Cebile spends R1,000 on electricity monthly – up from R700 the previous year. Load reduction forced her to use gas for cooking and buy ice to preserve stock, resulting in lost income.

This condition is referred to as 'energy poverty': the inability of households to access adequate energy services to power their electrical appliances and heat their homes.³⁴ In capabilities terms, energy poverty is

an inability to realise essential capabilities as a direct or indirect result of insufficient access to affordable, reliable and safe energy services (such as lighting, heating, cooling) and taking into account available reasonable alternative means of realising these capabilities.³⁵

This shifts the focus away from whether energy is available to what people are actually able to do with it.

Sovacool and Dworkin³⁶ suggest that everyone has the right to a minimum level of energy, while Frigo, Baumann and Hillerbrand³⁷ suggest that cooking fuel, nutrition and electricity are critical for promoting capabilities and should therefore be prioritised when considering access to energy services.

5.2 Reliability and productive activities

In South Africa, ongoing power outages through 'load shedding' have meant that poor households (especially women-led) are deprived of experiencing the human developmental benefits of access to electricity. In 2022, consumer vulnerability peaked during periods of intensified load shedding, with electricity cuts identified as a major contributor to financial strain. While load shedding has eased in some communities by 2025, many townships continue to experience prolonged electricity outages – now framed as 'load reduction' – which disproportionately affect low-income areas. This inequitable distribution of energy supply undermines household and business resilience.

The lack of services is not only a service issue; seemingly, it is also racialised. Load reduction has been targeted at townships which are predominantly inhabited by black Africans, including both Cosmo City and Ivory Park.

³⁴ Simcock et al. (2016).

³⁵ Day et al. (2016).

³⁶ Sovacool and Dworkin (2014).

³⁷ Frigo et al. (2021).



Kaseke and Hosking note electricity outages as a significant barrier to development.³⁸ However, the impacts are not uniform. Chipango shows that energy poverty is deeply gendered at the household level,³⁹ with women bearing a disproportionate burden, thereby intensifying capability deprivation.

For example, food security in low-income households is closely tied to access to reliable and affordable water and electricity, which are essential for storing, preparing, and safely consuming food. Interview findings reveal that when these services are inconsistent or unaffordable, households are forced to adopt precarious coping strategies that compromise both nutrition and dignity.

For instance, MaHlongwane's chicken intestines business was severely affected when ongoing power cuts, caused by a broken transformer, disrupted her neighbourhood. She could no longer buy stock in bulk, which is more affordable, due to the lack of refrigeration, while her customers also began purchasing only what they could consume immediately, as they were unable to store food without electricity. The prolonged electricity outage undermined the viability of her business, significantly reducing her capacity to support and care for her family over a six-month period. As a result, she was forced to make difficult trade-offs and carefully manage scarce financial resources to ensure her household's day-to-day survival.

These hardships were not inevitable but stemmed from the delayed repair of the community's broken transformer. Such conditions highlight how limited service access directly disrupts everyday food practices.

³⁸ Kaseke and Hosking (2013).

³⁹ Chipango (2021).

5.3 Affordability and adequate access

Lee et al.⁴⁰ critique compensation-based energy relief programmes in the United States which provide an immediate response to the energy needs of poor households through subsidies. They argue instead for capability-enhancing energy policies which have long-term benefits and contend that a capabilities approach addresses the 'root causes of energy affordability challenges', rather than merely alleviating symptoms. A comparable pattern is evident in South Africa, where the provision of free basic services (FBS) has largely adopted a compensation-focused logic which has had very limited human development impact.⁴¹

The FBS were introduced as a way to provide poor households with essential services in democratic South Africa, promising dignified living to a majority of black African households who faced dire living conditions during apartheid. However, the FBS system has deteriorated over the years, leaving poor households with precarious living conditions.

For example, the current structure of Joburg's Expanded Social Package, which provides up to 30 kWh of electricity and 50 litres⁴² of water to indigent households, is not meeting household needs. While some residents, like Bab'Nkosi, acknowledged receiving 30 units monthly, this was described as inadequate. He suggested increasing the threshold to at least 100 units, especially given how energy costs rise during winter months; the additional units would allow him to not only accommodate his family's basic needs (including those of his children and grandchildren) but also his business needs.

As Ledger and Rampedi argue, achieving universal energy access is essential for enabling developmental access – that is the point at which basic service provision begins to generate tangible social and economic benefits. They propose that all residents should receive at least the Minimum Threshold Level of Consumption (MTLC), the level of electricity use at which productivity, income generation and overall wellbeing improve. To reach this goal, government must ensure affordability for poor households by expanding the free basic electricity (FBE) allocation.

High electricity costs place a significant burden on child grant recipients, who are predominantly women. Faced with limited household resources, many are forced to make difficult trade-offs to meet their basic needs. For example, women often struggle to cover monthly household expenses and frequently purchase electricity on credit, using their child support grants to repay these debts once the grants are received.⁴³

This suggests that applying a capability approach to energy policy can lead to significant strides in undoing structural imbalances in townships and even improve developmental standards. This echoes calls by Mbano-Mweso⁴⁴ and Ledger⁴⁵ to consider service use holistically rather than in isolation. It highlights the need for a fundamental rethink of service delivery models to ensure they support – rather than hinder – the economic participation of households.

The next chapter uses the home as a site where care and production intersect, highlighting how women navigate the dual demands of income generation and unpaid care work under conditions of service insecurity.

40 Lee et al. (2021).

41 Ledger and Rampedi (2022).

42 CoJ, 'City Services: Expanded Social Package'.

43 Witten and Zembe (2021).

44 Mbano-Mweso (2020).

45 Ledger and Mathibela (2025).

CHAPTER 6:

**WHERE CARE MEETS PRODUCTION:
WOMEN'S WORK IN THE HOME**



Sphe is a resident cook at a kota establishment. While her boss has provided them with a gas stove so that business continues when there is no power, their lives come to a halt at her home because she cannot prepare meals for her family or iron her child's school uniform.

Women's productive activities are intertwined with their other responsibilities such as childcare and homecare. Therefore, 'home' is an important theme used to connect 'capabilities' and 'access to services'. The notion of 'home' extends beyond shelter to serve as a multifaceted economic asset. Home encompasses a wide range of experiences relating to family, placemaking and emotions.⁴⁶

The idea of human settlements where housing is not only about shelter but rather an ecosystem where people are able to 'live, work and play' has failed in these contexts because people are unable to improve their livelihoods within these neighbourhoods.

Linked to these spatial dynamics, energy services are also central to the functioning of the home and care economy. Drawing on care ethics, Groves et al. argue that capabilities are shaped by the interaction between social relationships and material conditions.⁴⁷ This framing foregrounds how structural inequalities and unequal power relations produce differentiated vulnerabilities, revealing that patterns of resource access, use and deprivation are frequently gendered.

6.1 Safety

Safety is a critical dimension to consider when unpacking women's access to basic services. Within a capabilities framework, the value of water and electricity lies not only in their availability, but in the extent to which they enable individuals to live and work without exposure to harm, fear or insecurity.

No access to electricity means that women's physical safety (and the safety of those under their care) is jeopardised. Women-run businesses are often visibly gendered, which can shape daily operations as women navigate not only the demands of running a business, but also heightened exposure to exploitation, harassment and opportunistic behaviour in contexts of insecurity. For example, several women participating in the food economy said that no lighting means they need to close their shops early to ensure that they are safe.

⁴⁶ Mallet (2004).

⁴⁷ Groves et al. (2021).



Petunia is a small business owner based in Ivory Park, where she runs a kota and fatcake business.

Petunia said she recently had a robbery incident where her business was targeted. Her valuable equipment, stove and other items were stolen from her home and business storage room. While the perpetrators were identified and arrested, they were released soon after. This has instilled deeper fear in her and she does not feel safe operating the business. She believes if she was a man, things would have been much different. These fears are even more heightened when women are literally left in the dark.

Beyond its impact on women's physical safety, inconsistent and unaffordable access to basic services also undermines their environmental health. Infrastructural violence through limited access to water means that women's health is also greatly impacted. Not being able to flush toilets or wash their hands, especially during their menstrual cycle, means women are daily activities within the household are disrupted.⁴⁸ Further, running businesses in the food economy and service economy (such as hair salons) means women need to prioritise cleanliness and more frequently rely on consistent access to water for the running of their businesses.

6.2 Access to services and productive activities

Dire economic challenges mean that the main caretakers of homes – often women – and their co-caretakers – often children – need to make do with very limited resources. 'Home' is thus, 'socially thick',⁴⁹ a place where women operate in a space in which living and working are deeply entangled. Their businesses – often shaped by domestic responsibilities and social expectations – are embedded in the reproductive realm.

These challenges are deeply gendered and intersect with the unequal burden of unpaid care work, which is predominantly carried by women in South Africa. Women's responsibility for sourcing, preparing and distributing food positions them at the centre of household food security, while simultaneously limiting their participation in formal employment.⁵⁰ The dual demands of care and income generation mean that disruptions to basic services intensify both time poverty and economic vulnerability. Recognising care work as central to food systems is therefore critical.

According to Matshidiso, a woman interviewed by Ledger and Rampedi:

Everything at home starts with us women, so we are highly affected by the lack of electricity because we have to take care of the home; to make sure that it is clean and there is food. It is not nice to see your child going to school with wrinkled clothes, or when you cannot set an alarm on your phone, so everyone gets late to work and school, or to not have a working fridge because there is no power. We usually cannot help our kids with assignments because of the bad electricity.⁵¹

Meth provides a useful extension by analysing the interconnected struggles of youth to access work and housing, arguing that these domains are mutually constitutive and central to both survival and sociocultural meaning-making.⁵² This study engages a similar nexus by examining how women secure work opportunities through home-based livelihood activities. In this context, 'home' is understood less in terms of ownership or tenure, and more as the lived site from which economic opportunities, constraints and survival strategies emerge.

Empirical data shows that residents leverage their living spaces for diverse ventures, where housing

48 Jooste and Mathibela (2020).

49 Dawson (2025).

50 Cherrington et al. (2021).

51 Ledger and Rampedi (2022).

52 Meth (2026).

functions simultaneously as physical capital, social space and a financial asset.⁵³ However, unreliable and unaffordable services compromise this productive capacity: when water and power are unstable, these micro-enterprises stall, disrupting livelihoods and perpetuating poverty.

Building women's productive capacity improves their ability to generate an income, reduces their exposure to poverty and decreases inequality.⁵⁴ It also means they are less prone to shocks and vulnerability.⁵⁵

6.3 Coping strategies, at what cost?

Failure to deliver water and electricity consistently and at an affordable rate means women need to incur additional costs or face business closure if they are unable to adapt. Households are therefore being pushed toward using alternative energy sources – candles, paraffin, and gas – not for convenience, but out of necessity. However, these stopgaps come with their own risks, including fire hazards and additional costs that many cannot afford.

Tito explained that he invested in a generator to maintain business continuity during outages, but this adaptation comes at a cost – R100 weekly for diesel – adding financial pressure to already thin margins.

Hlamu has lived in Ivory Park since 2019 and works as a seamstress from her rented home. She supplements her household income by sewing and altering clothing for local customers. Her work relies primarily on electricity for sewing and ironing.

Hlamu rents temporary salon space to complete orders and meet customer deadlines during outages – a workaround that costs money and relies on availability.

Nkati also pays R5 to refill a 5 litre bottle during water outages, a manageable cost short-term but untenable if outages persist.

Women entrepreneurs draw on dense social ties to navigate uncertainty such as 'borrowing electricity' (by charging devices at their neighbour's house) and purchasing water in buckets. Surfacing the social climate in which women-led home-based businesses operate reveals how women mobilise networks, time and space to sustain their productive activities amid ongoing service delivery failures.

However, being able to mitigate the impact of not having access to water or electricity is a luxury. When the impact is more long-term (such as Ma'Hlongwane's experience of no electricity for six months due to an unrepaired burst transformer), households are even more vulnerable and are forced to rethink the feasibility of their productive activities.

These stopgap solutions underline that residents are not passive victims of service failure – they adapt where they can. However, such adaptation is not without limits or consequences.

⁵³ Rust, 'Framing Concept: Understanding the housing asset'.

⁵⁴ UNCTAD (2022).

⁵⁵ Ibid.



6.4 What does 'hustling' really look like when at home?

Unreliable and unaffordable water and electricity supply is not occasional for women in Ivory Park and Cosmo City – they are structural features of everyday life. A sample of 18 respondents showed that on average, women-led households in Ivory Park generate a monthly income which ranges from R2,000 to R15,000 from their small businesses, when they have consistent access to water and electricity. They mostly run these from their homes, where they depend on water and electricity for the daily functioning of their businesses or in some instances, they rent spaces in high streets where access to services is an additional cost.

Among the five Ivory Park residents who reported both income and monthly utility expenditure, electricity costs range from approximately 7 to 40 per cent of monthly income. This indicates that the affordability of basic services is important for small-scale HBEs who spend a significant share of their income on utility costs.

Without any disruptions to services, these households are left on average with R2,579.46 to cover their household costs and reinvest in their businesses. This is already insufficient to afford the R3,732 required per month for a nutritionally adequate basket of food.⁵⁶ When there are no services, this income is threatened, making their budget tighter.

The fact that poor households spend as much as R806.25 per month on basic services demonstrates that affordability is equally critical.

The next chapter reflects on the implications of the research findings for human development and gender equality and proposes recommendations for more reliable, affordable and gender-responsive service delivery.

⁵⁶ Ledger and Mathibela (2025).

CHAPTER 7:

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Conclusion

Livelihoods that depend on daily improvisation are inherently fragile. This is particularly true when services do not fulfil their developmental mandate. In many Johannesburg townships, unreliable and unaffordable access to water and electricity traps households in a constant state of survival, making long-term planning and economic mobility nearly impossible. While residents show remarkable resilience – turning to gas appliances, storing water, borrowing equipment, or adjusting business operations – these coping strategies are temporary and often come at significant financial, physical and emotional cost.

These coping strategies can mitigate the effects of service failure, but they cannot substitute for reliable and affordable public provision. Their availability also depends on the resources and social networks available to individual households. This means that the ability to cope is itself unequal.

The findings of this report show that inadequate access to basic services is not merely an issue of infrastructure delivery. It is a form of capability deprivation that limits people's ability to engage in productive activities, care for their households and participate fully in social and economic life. When these services fail, people's capabilities are constrained, often forcing them to devote time, income and effort to coping with shortages and disruptions.

Importantly, these deprivations are not experienced equally. They are structurally produced through longstanding patterns of uneven development and service provision, shaped by South Africa's history of racial exclusion and spatial inequality. As a result, residents of townships and other marginalised areas continue to bear a disproportionate burden of unreliable and unaffordable services. These inequalities are further gendered, as women often shoulder the responsibility for managing household wellbeing and running an HBE. The added burden of responding to service failures increases time spent doing unpaid work and limits their ability pursue an education or paid work.

For women running HBEs, these effects compound one another. Service disruptions increase unpaid care responsibilities at the same time as they reduce the time and resources available for income generation. Prolonged service failures can therefore affect several capabilities simultaneously, undermining income, care, food security and household resilience.

Addressing these challenges requires more than expanding infrastructure; it requires ensuring that services are reliable, affordable and equitably distributed so that all citizens can exercise the capabilities necessary to live with dignity and achieve sustainable pathways out of poverty. Water and electricity must be seen as preconditions for care, survival and income generation.

Policymakers also need to move beyond viewing the home as simply a space of consumption. The home is a site of economic activity, especially in low-income communities where the home is often the only viable place to earn an income. Service delivery models must urgently be reimagined to meet both domestic and productive needs.

7.2 Recommendations

7.2.1 *Provide immediate service delivery*

- Municipal entities should prioritise delivering consistent access to basic services which does not compromise daily life, livelihoods and health.
- Prolonged service failures that threaten both household functioning and livelihood activities should be prioritised for repair.
- In instances where there will be disruptions to services, communication must be clear and timeous.
- Given the importance of women's safety (beyond achieving capabilities and 'hustling'), municipalities need to ensure that streetlights remain operational even during load shedding. This could be possible through investing in solar panels which keep streetlights working especially in high streets.
- Early childhood centres (ECDs) should have consistent access to water; where this is not possible, emergency services in the form of water tanks and tankers should be provided.
- Water meters should be repaired to allow for informed accountability, enabling households to accurately track their water usage and charges.
- Reliable and transparent billing should be part of access to basic services, enabling households to anticipate costs and be better able to manage limited budgets and challenge incorrect charges.

7.2.2 *Reframe access around domestic and productive needs*

- Municipal service standards and indigent support should recognise that many low-income households need water and electricity not only for domestic use, but also to earn a living.
- The allocation of FBW should be increased to 8 kl and FBE to 150 kWh, while tightening the number of indigent households who benefit to those living below the lower-bound poverty line. Research by Ledger and Mathibela⁵⁷ shows that this will add critical value to the human development potential of these households. This is especially true for women-headed households which rely on income generated from small businesses for survival. Women-headed households should be prioritised for free basic services (FBS).

7.2.3 *Provide institutional coordination*

- There needs to be a shift towards coordination between local government departments responsible for local economic development (LED), the provision of basic services and delivery of human settlements. This stresses the importance of thinking about the housing ecosystem which supports thriving rather than sheltering.

Water and electricity, delivered in quantities that support domestic and business use, are the key to unlocking the capabilities of women hustling every day in our townships.

57 Ledger and Mathibela (2025).

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