



Urban Wellbeing paradox

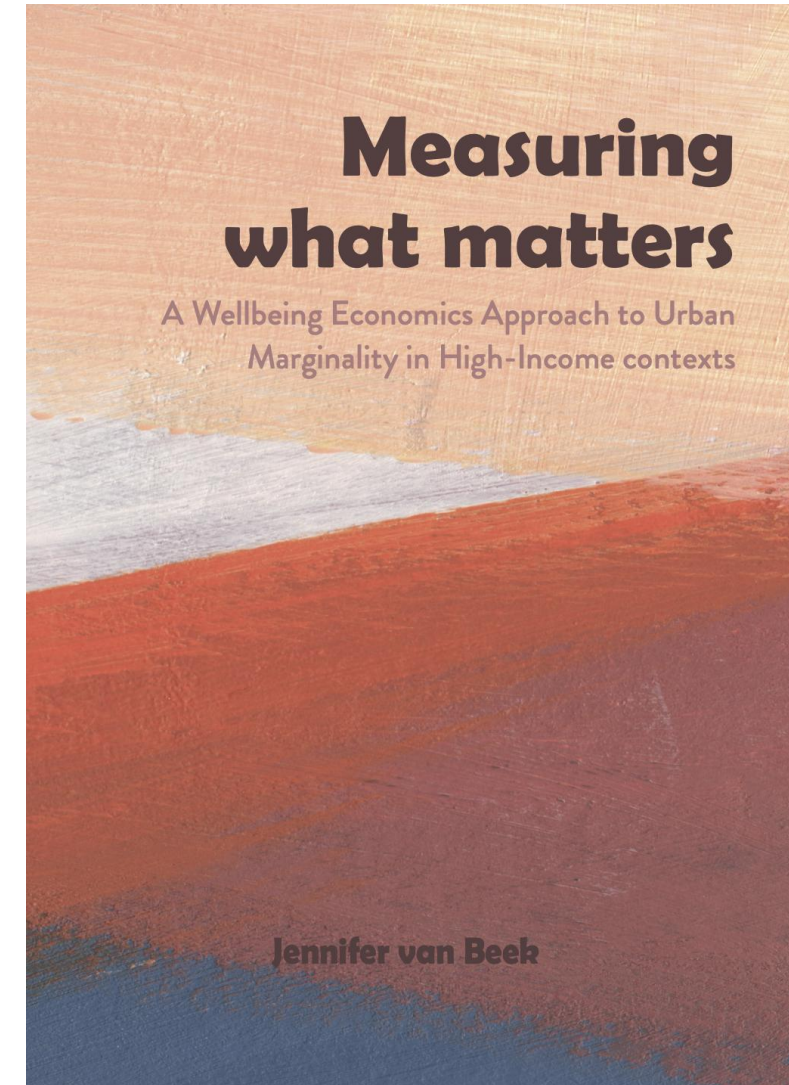
*A Spatial Examination of the Urban Wellbeing
Paradox in Europe*

*Exploratory study on measurement and spatial
manifestations of wellbeing in Northern and Western
European cities*



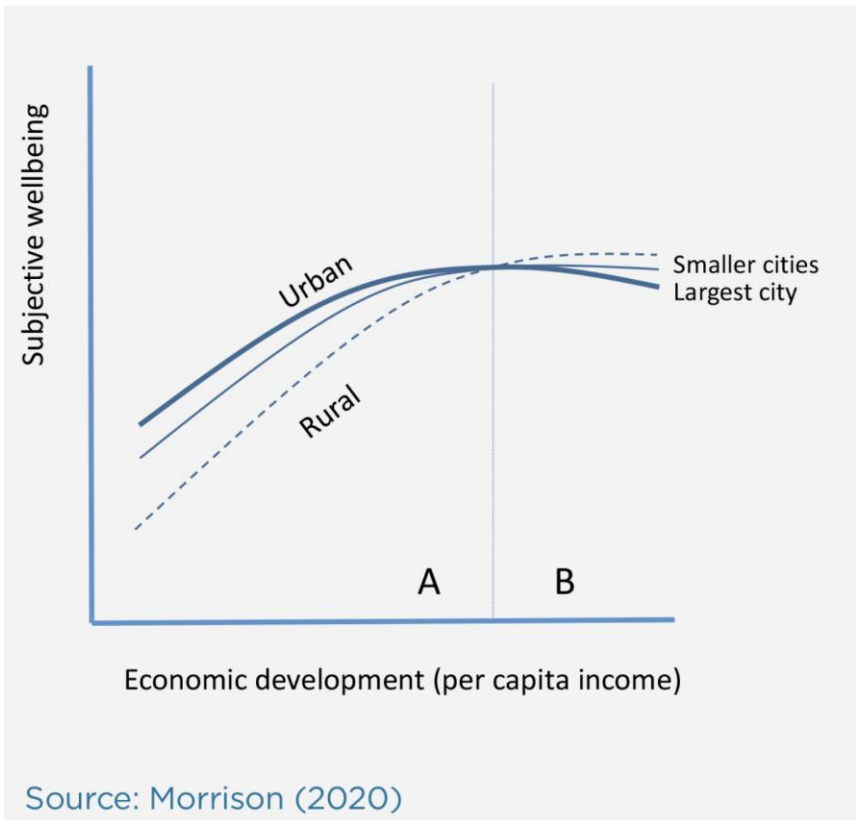
Background

- PhD supervised by prof. Nicky Pouw and dr. Hebe Verrest
 - Exploratory study: lack of situated and experiential policy knowledge, widening gap between policy and lived experience, growing mistrust and hidden vulnerabilities
- Wellbeing operationalized by neighbourhood communities, bottom-up measurement of Wellbeing
- Unequal opportunity structures and broader wellbeing deficits

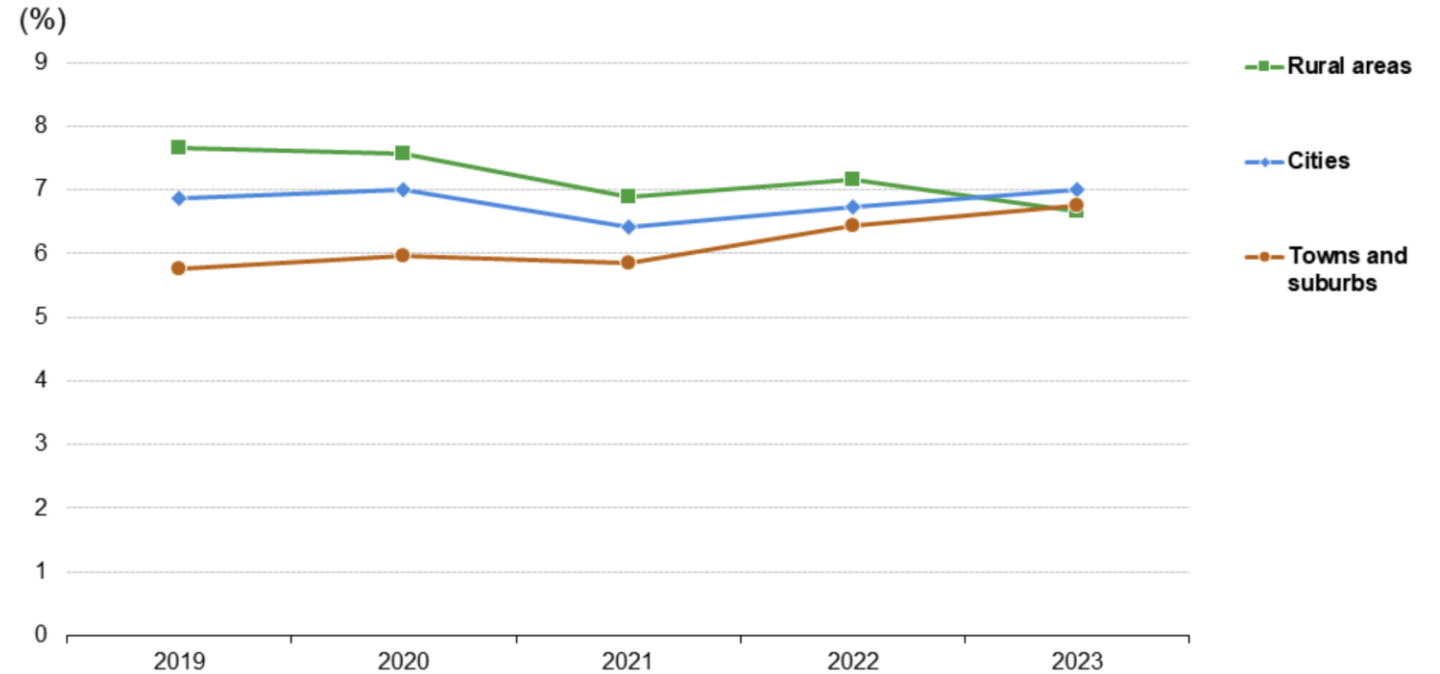


Urban wellbeing in Europe

Economic growth $\neq$ social progress



Severe material and social deprivation rate, by degree of urbanisation, EU, 2019–23



Source: Eurostat (EU-SILC ad hoc extraction)



The “Urban Wellbeing paradox”

Urban wellbeing paradox (Morrison, 2024; Lenzi & Perucca, 2023); Urban paradox (Carlsen and Leknes, 2022); Urban desirability paradox (Finnemann et al., 2024).

Suggested drivers:

Cost of living and housing insecurity; relational fragmentation/ lack of social cohesion; exclusion causing dissatisfaction and mistrust; stress and psychological pressure; overburdened urban infrastructures (Burger et al., 2020; Finnemann et al., 2024; Carlsen and Leknes, 2022; Robeyns, 2025, p. 164; Yardımcı, 2022; Lenzi and Perucca, 2024).



The “Urban Wellbeing paradox”

- Found in Northern and western European, large, urban areas
- Rather than a universal feature of affluent urban areas, it affects lower income groups and accumulates disadvantage

Confirms findings in Amsterdam case

Lower wellbeing levels across material, relational and subjective wellbeing domains manifest spatially and concentrated among population with low ‘socioeconomic status’



Data limitations

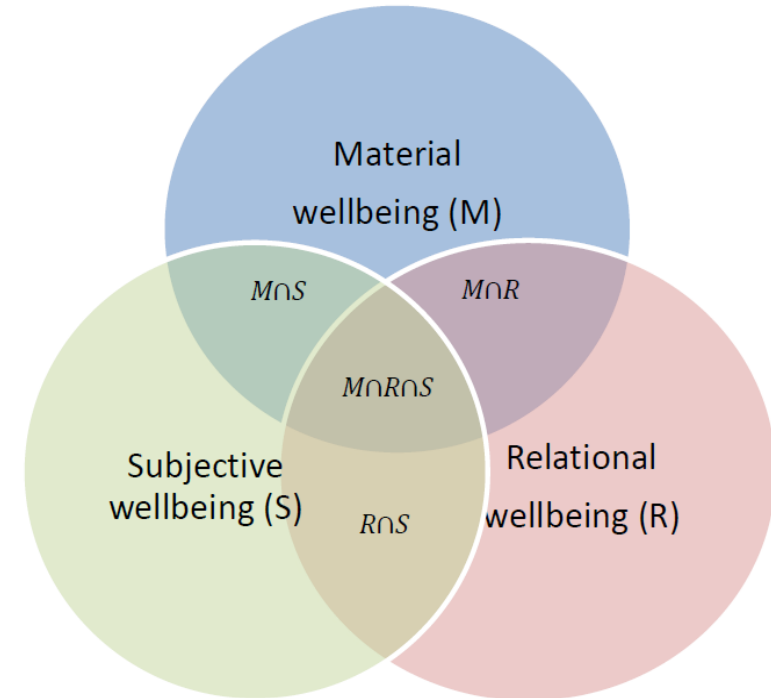
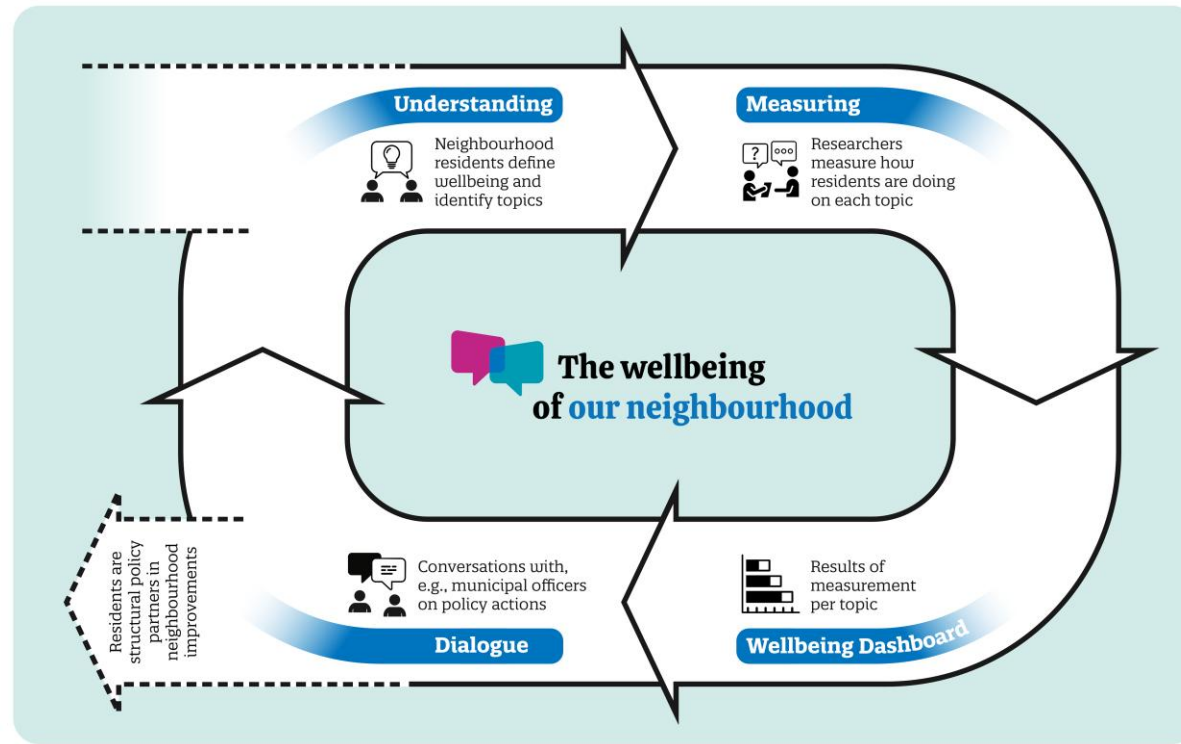
Wellbeing is increasingly measured, however

Limited wellbeing measures	Cross-city comparable data mainly cover demographic and environmental proxies rather than self-reported wellbeing.
Scarce small-area data	Open, <u>harmonised</u> neighbourhood-level wellbeing data across European cities are extremely rare.
Uneven coverage	Data availability varies substantially across cities and years, limiting balanced comparisons.
National-data comparability	National statistical bureau data often differ in definitions, geographic units, disclosure rules, and time coverage, weakening cross-country comparability.



Local wellbeing measurement

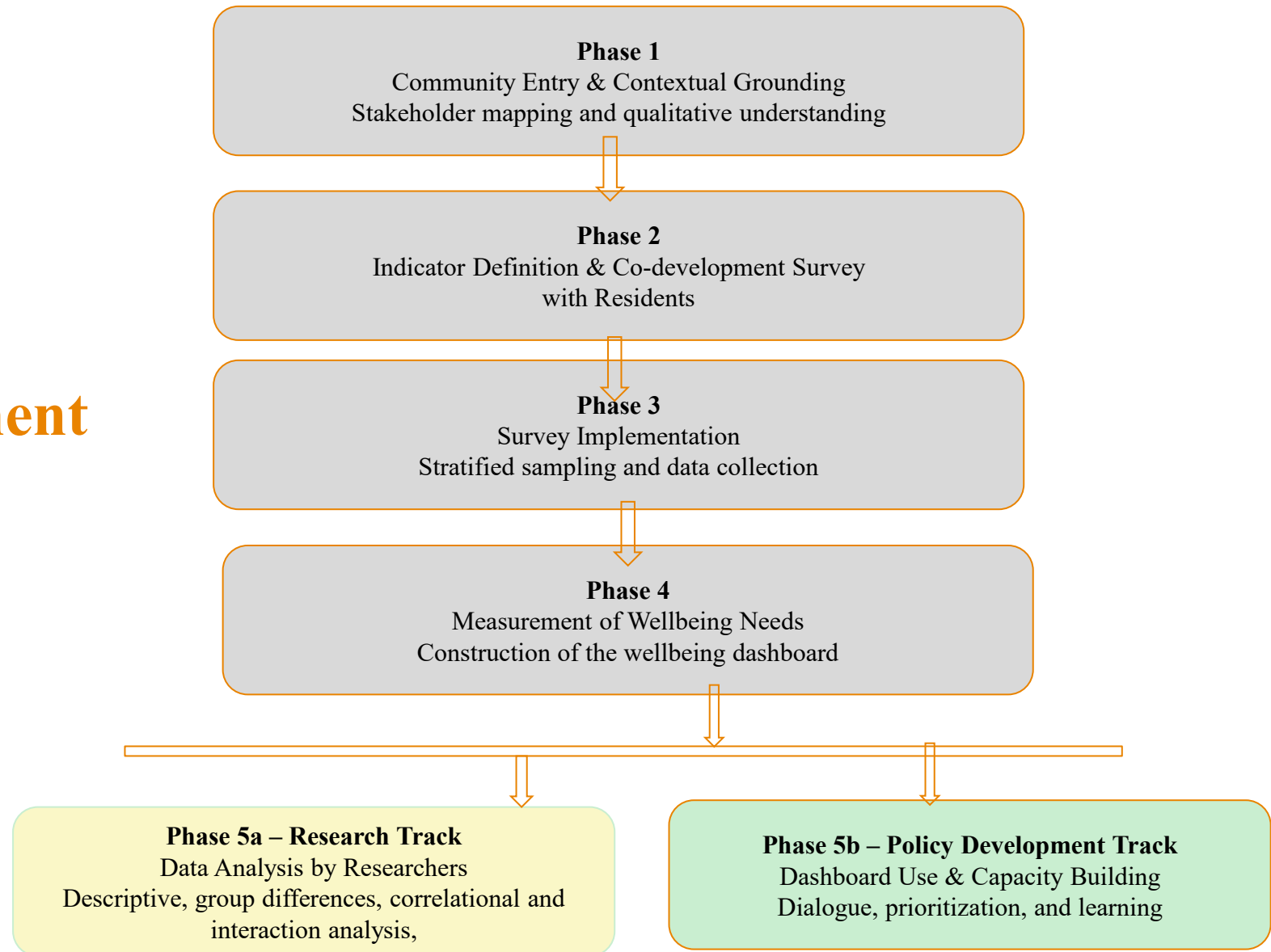
Method and first insights

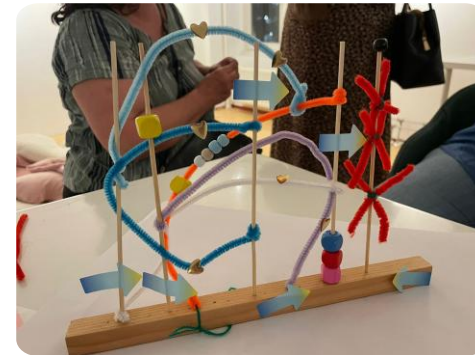
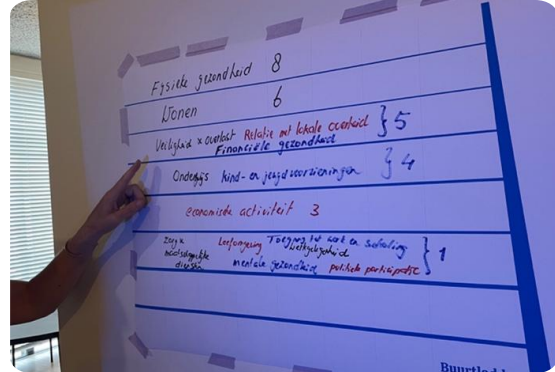
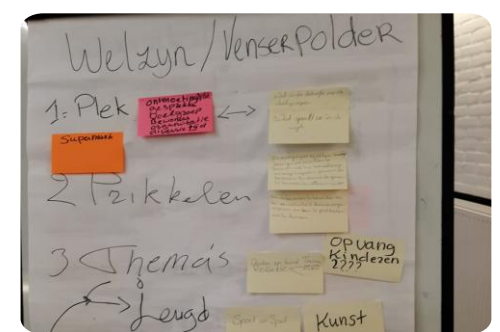
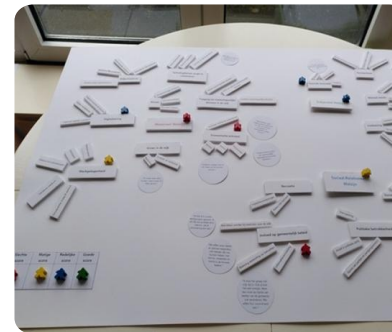
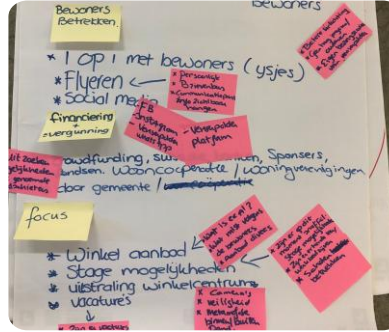
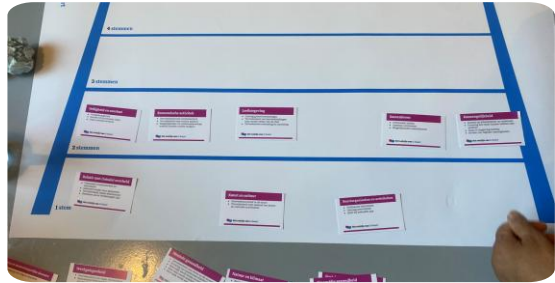


Source: Pouw and McGregor 2014



Bottom-up method Wellbeing measurement



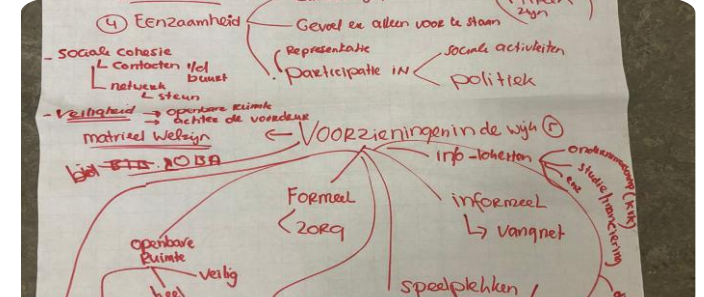


DOE MEE MET DE VRAGENLIJST!

Hallo bewoner van Reigersbos,

Hoe gaat het met jou en met de buurt? Wat kan beter volgens jou?
Wij horen graag jouw ervaringen en ideeën!

De Universiteit van Amsterdam en bewonersplatform Reigersbos maken een 'Welvinsdashbord' voor Reigersbos. Dit is een meetinstrument dat laat zien wat





First insights drawn from

6 neighbourhoods

Data points: => 1,600 respondents

*Wellbeing measured based on 15 to 17 topics,
measured through 35 to 45 indicators*

Southeast district

Venserpolder

G-Buurt

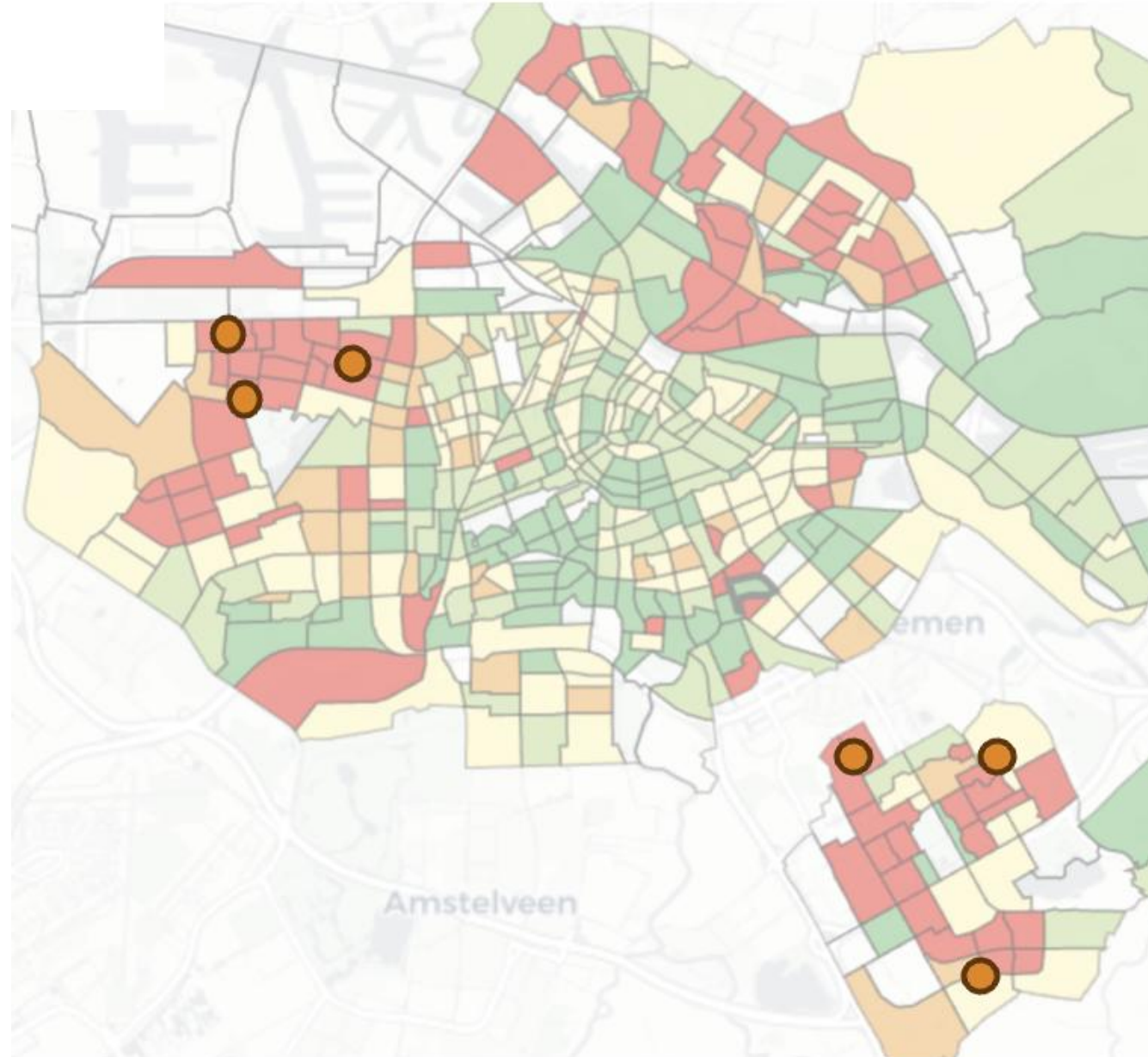
Reigersbos

New West district

Wegener Sleswijkbuurt

De Dobbebuurt

Ruys de Beerenbrouckbuurt





Insights from comparison analysis

Common indicators across neighbourhoods

→ suggesting a foundational layer of *basic safety* wellbeing needs;

Differences in *higher-order* wellbeing needs

→ reflecting demographic composition and contextual variation;

Differences in prioritization of wellbeing needs

→ indicating situated trade-off making between wellbeing domains

A sequential “dual-layer” approach to area intervention

-Safeguarding a baseline of *basic safety* wellbeing needs

-Additional investments tailored to neighbourhood-specific priorities



Policy comparison

- Reveal hidden vulnerabilities (e.g. frequency of stress found as central mediating variable in wellbeing outcomes in Venserpolder, while not measured as such in official datasets).
- Provide complementary policy insight based on experiential and situated insight (e.g. in addition to official indicators on number of facilities and social services, bottom-up wellbeing indicators measure whether these are sufficient and meet residents' needs).

→ community knowledge is relevant and legitimate.

Policy recognition $\neq$ effective policy action



To be explored and understood

- How neighbourhoods compare in terms of wellbeing levels
- Causal mechanisms behind neighbourhood outcomes
- Within neighbourhood variation and differentiated urgency
- Actionability of neighbourhood prioritized needs (e.g. resources, institutional support and openness)

Policy implications

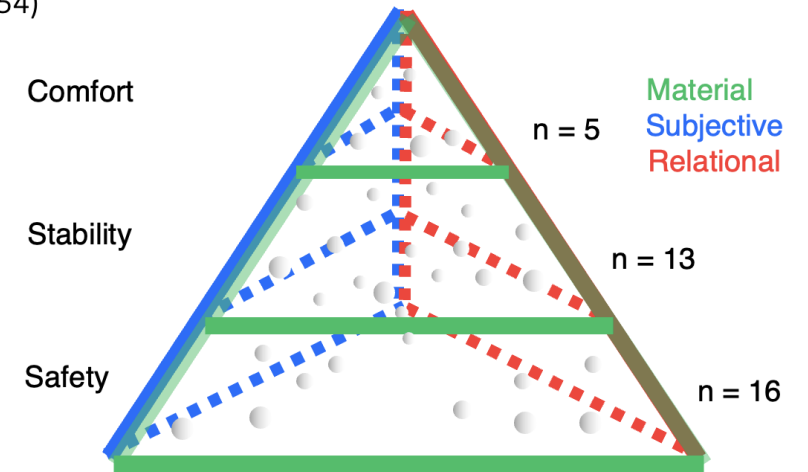
Multidimensional and contextual trade-off model

- Supporting implementation of Amsterdam's policy strategy
“*unequal investments for equal opportunity*”
- Epistemic and procedural citizen empowerment through community-led measurement and dialogue

Constraints and challenges:

- Local-level use: integration in current ways of working and policy practices
- Upscaling: need for wider institutional support, resources, support for bottom-up methods and governance uptake
- Ensuring representation when aggregating
- Maintaining empowering and inclusive participation processes

35 Indicators distributed over three wellbeing layers
(N =254)



'Wellbeing pyramid' for categorizing neighbourhood indicators and comparing levels across neighbourhoods (source: dr. Nicky Pouw)