Empowering communities through citizen science: Redefining prosperity in Tanzania

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Image: UCL Institute for Global Prosperity

The Citizen Prosperity Index offers essential data for effective policymaking and community action, aligning with global development goals focused on community empowerment and sustainable growth, key priorities for organisations like the UNDP

Research in Tanzania by the UCL Institute for Global Prosperity (IGP) is pioneering an approach that empowers local communities to define, measure, and shape prosperous pathways that reflect local needs and priorities. The Citizen Prosperity Index is an approach that yields vital context-specific data to inform robust policymaking and community action. It aligns with global development objectives focusing on community empowerment and inclusive sustainable development – themes central to organisations like the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Traditional definitions of prosperity, often externally imposed, can fail to reflect local realities. The IGP at UCL is redefining prosperity beyond purely economic measures, towards a comprehensive understanding that includes community well-being, environmental sustainability, and social justice. Central to this is the UCL Citizen Science Academy – democratising research by employing and training local people as 'citizen social scientists'.

The UCL Citizen Science Academy, developed and based at the IGP, supports research co-created with citizens, often without prior university education or research experience. The Academy operates globally, working with communities in the UK, Lebanon, Tanzania, Kenya, Thailand, and the Caribbean and engaging policymakers, from municipal authorities to international agencies, ensuring research translates into impact.

The Maisha Bora Study: A Community-led vision of the good life

The 'Maisha Bora' (Good Life) Study in Tanzania exemplifies this methodology. Undertaken with the Centre for Community Initiatives (CCI), a Tanzanian nongovernmental organisation that works to improve the lives of poor urban communities, the Study focuses on three unplanned settlements in Dar es Salaam: Mji Mpya, Bonde La Mpunga, and Keko Machungwa. These communities, typical of many rapidly urbanising areas in Dar es Salaam, one of Africa's fastest-growing urban centres, face significant inequalities, including hazardous living conditions and limited basic service access, often leading to marginalisation from planning, policy and decision-making.

The Maisha Bora Study alters this dynamic. Local residents, trained by the Citizen Science Academy in research ethics and research methods, investigate what prosperity means to them and develop evidence to share with policymakers.

This co-designed process began with extensive qualitative research – over 160 interviews and numerous focus groups – to grasp local interpretations of prosperity, deliberately including often-overlooked perspectives like disabled residents and older community members.

From lived experience to actionable data: The Maisha Bora Model and Index

Insights gathered by citizen scientists were collaboratively analysed in intensive co-production workshops. This led to the 'Maisha Bora Model' – a framework detailing crucial elements for a good life in Dar es Salaam.

The Model has five interlinked domains: Foundations of Prosperity (secure livelihoods, safe housing), Health and Healthy Neighbourhoods (accessible health services, clean environment), Opportunities and Aspirations (education, entrepreneurship), Belonging, Identities and Culture (social relationships, cultural practices), and Power, Voice and Influence (community empowerment, political inclusion).

The 'Maisha Bora' Model was translated into a survey tool, and citizen scientists collected data from 1,000 households in Mji Mpya, Keko Machungwa, and Bonde La Mpunga. The survey data was used to create the Maisha Bora Index (view in Swahili or English) – the first citizen-led prosperity measure in Africa. Launched in January 2025, the Index reports on levels of prosperity in the three settlements, providing detailed data on the community-identified prosperity dimensions.

Driving change: Community-led interventions and policy influence

The Maisha Bora Study is an impetus for practical, community-led change. Communities use the findings and Index to pinpoint priorities and co-design interventions. In Mji Mpya, priorities include infrastructure (drainage, waste management), social services (safe water, affordable health insurance), and clean cooking energy. Working groups involving community, government, and business stakeholders are working with local entrepreneurs, with support from Fast Forward 2030 Africa, to develop and test new solutions.

This citizen-led methodology addresses the gap between policy and lived realities. Enabling communities to generate evidence and participate in creating solutions fosters a more democratic and effective development approach. It enhances local capacities in research, advocacy, and engagement with policymakers, ensuring local perspectives shape equitable urban futures.

Aligning with global development agendas

The UCL Citizen Science Academy and the broader work of the IGP align with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including leaving no one behind, inclusive societies (SDG 16), sustainable infrastructure (SDG 9, SDG 11), and well-being (SDG 3). It also mirrors the UNDP's emphasis on local governance, empowering marginalised communities, and using data for sustainable human development.

The drivers for self-defined prosperity in one locality may differ significantly from those in another, and the IGP has implemented its Citizen Prosperity Index approach in other locations, including Beirut in Lebanon, and east London, where research is interrogating the legacy of the 2012 Olympic Games on the lives of local residents.

Studies like Maisha Bora underscore citizen social science's transformative potential. When communities direct research, knowledge is more pertinent, and the gap between policymakers and citizens is made closer and less distinct. Citizen-led methodologies offer a blueprint for research as a vehicle for empowerment and data-gathering. The work of citizen scientists in Tanzania demonstrates collaborative knowledge production's efficacy and the role academia can have in creating structures where communities can lead in pursuing their self-determined 'maisha bora'.

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