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## Article

# Resilient Lifeworlds: Pluriversal Wellbeing, Informal Economies, and the Emergence of Post-GDP Civilizational Indicators in Africa

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## Abstract

This article examines the emergence of post-GDP civilizational indicators in Africa through the lens of informal economies, relational wellbeing, and pluriversal epistemologies. Conventional economic metrics erase the complexity and creativity of African livelihoods, particularly the informal, communal, and spiritual dimensions that sustain resilience across rural and urban lifeworlds. Drawing from anthropology of value (Graeber), wellbeing theory (Nussbaum, Sen), pluriversal philosophy (Santos, Escobar), and African relational ethics, the paper conceptualizes wellbeing as a multidimensional constellation encompassing ecological embeddedness, relational solidarity, capabilities, meaning-making, and community resilience. Informal economies—often dismissed as “unproductive”—are in fact crucial laboratories for post-GDP thinking. Empirical insights from Kinshasa, Lagos, Dakar, and Kigali show the emergence of hybrid value systems based on cooperation, digital micro-innovation, spiritual cohesion, gendered care networks, and ecological reciprocity. These dynamics provide fertile ground for a new generation of African indicators centered on regenerative value, relational flourishing, and community capabilities. The paper introduces the concept of **Pluriversal Wellbeing Matrices (PWM)**—a methodological and conceptual tool for capturing Africa’s post-GDP prosperity landscape, integrating ecological data, socio-cultural relations, informal economic creativity, and spiritual foundations of resilience.

**Keywords:** post-GDP; informal economies; relational wellbeing; pluriversal indicators; African cities; anthropology of value; regenerative metrics; capabilities; spiritual resilience; sociotechnical innovation

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## Introduction

Across Africa, the majority of value creation occurs outside formal markets, national accounts, and GDP registers. These informal economies, often labeled as “shadow” or “unproductive” by conventional development metrics, are in reality vibrant, adaptive, and relational systems that sustain livelihoods, social cohesion, and ecological stewardship. Informality is not a deficit; it is a civilizational resource, embodying practices of mutual aid, reciprocity, and community governance embedded in deep historical, cultural, and spiritual traditions (Charmes, 2018; Skinner, 2020; Moleka, 2025a, 2025b).

This article argues that informal economies and spiritual-cultural practices in Africa are central to developing **post-GDP indicators of wellbeing**, capable of capturing relational, ecological, and pluriversal dimensions of prosperity. By integrating anthropological, ecological, and economic perspectives, the study introduces **Pluriversal Wellbeing Matrices (PWM)**, a novel framework to measure multidimensional prosperity in African lifeworlds.

The article unfolds in seven sections: first, it critiques GDP’s limitations and its epistemic erasure of African informalities. Second, it elaborates on the anthropology of value and African relational philosophies. Third, it examines informal economies as infrastructures of resilience. Fourth, it

develops a conceptual framework for pluriversal wellbeing. Fifth, it presents the PWM as a methodological innovation. Sixth, it draws on empirical cases from urban and rural Africa. Seventh, it discusses policy implications and governance innovations, concluding with Africa as a civilizational laboratory for post-GDP metrics.

## 1. Limitations of GDP and the Silence on African Informality

The Gross Domestic Product (GDP), conceived during the interwar and postwar period primarily for accounting and macroeconomic management purposes, has become the hegemonic metric of national progress. While originally intended as a measure of economic throughput rather than human wellbeing, its institutionalization across the globe—particularly in post-colonial African states—has imported not only statistical techniques but also epistemic assumptions rooted in Western industrial modernity (Kuznets, 1934; Stiglitz et al., 2010). GDP operationalizes value as a function of marketized output, inherently privileging formal industrial and service sectors, commodifiable goods, and monetary transactions. Non-monetized forms of production—community labor, artisanal crafts, subsistence agriculture, and reciprocal social exchanges—are either rendered invisible or systematically devalued. In the African context, where informal economies constitute the primary livelihood mechanism for the majority of citizens, this exclusion produces not merely a measurement gap but a profound misrepresentation of social reality (Fioramonti, 2017; Skinner, 2020).

The epistemic bias embedded in GDP extends beyond technical oversight to a form of symbolic violence, wherein complex relational, ecological, and cultural practices are dismissed as non-productive (Aguinam & Asadu, 2025). Street markets in Dakar, mobile food vendors in Kinshasa, cooperative farming networks in rural Rwanda, and craft-based economies in Lagos are socially, culturally, and ecologically rich spaces that sustain everyday life, foster intergenerational knowledge transfer, and reinforce social cohesion. These informal spaces are incubators of adaptive strategies that allow communities to navigate environmental variability, economic shocks, and political uncertainties. The exclusion of such practices from national accounting frameworks perpetuates a deficit narrative, portraying African economies as inherently underdeveloped, despite their demonstrated relational and adaptive complexity (Charmes, 2018). Moreover, it enforces a homogenizing metric of development that privileges growth-oriented, extractive models, obscuring alternative epistemologies of value embedded in local practices, norms, and institutions.

Moving beyond GDP necessitates an epistemic pluralism that recognizes multiple ways of knowing and valuing life. It requires re-centering African knowledge systems that define prosperity not solely through material accumulation but through relational, ecological, and spiritual sustainability (Herzog & Maximo Pereira, 2025 ; MacFeely, van de Ven & Peltola, 2024). GDP fails to account for the critical social fabrics that underpin economic activity: mutual aid networks, ritualized reciprocity, ethical stewardship of land and water, and community-led risk management. In this light, informal economies should be viewed not as marginal or peripheral, but as core infrastructures of resilience, embodying lessons in decentralized governance, ecological accountability, and social solidarity that contemporary development paradigms often neglect (chen & Carré, 2020).

Furthermore, the persistence of GDP as a policy anchor reinforces structural inequalities. By privileging formal sector growth, states inadvertently marginalize informal actors, often constraining their access to financial instruments, social protection, and technological support. The invisibility of these economies in development planning undermines both policy legitimacy and societal resilience, as interventions based solely on GDP-driven assumptions fail to align with the lived realities of the majority population. Consequently, a recalibration of metrics toward plural, relational, and multidimensional indicators of prosperity is essential to capture the real dynamics of African lifeworlds, thereby aligning measurement with justice, ecological sustainability, and human flourishing.

## 2. Anthropology of Value and African Relational Philosophies

The anthropology of value, particularly as developed by David Graeber (2001), offers an indispensable lens for rethinking African economies and social systems. Graeber challenges the universalist conception of value as an intrinsic property of objects or economic outputs, emphasizing instead its socially constructed, relational, and historically contingent nature. In African contexts, value is deeply embedded in moral, ecological, and spiritual networks, where the worth of actions, objects, and relationships is inseparable from their contribution to collective wellbeing, ecological balance, and intergenerational continuity. By foregrounding relationality and reciprocity, African value systems contest the atomistic, instrumentalist, and growth-oriented assumptions underpinning conventional development metrics.

Central to this relational ontology is the Bantu concept of *bumuntu*, which articulates the qualities of genuine humanness—compassion, dignity, ethical responsibility, and social integrity. *Bumuntu* situates individual flourishing within a broader web of social and ecological obligations, encompassing kin, community, and the non-human world (Metz, 2017; Moleka, 2025c). Development, from this perspective, is inseparable from moral and ecological commitments: prosperity is measured not only by material sufficiency but also by the cultivation of virtuous relationships, stewardship of natural resources, and care for future generations. The moral economy of *bumuntu* challenges the dominant GDP paradigm by insisting that value resides in relational patterns, ethical comportment, and ecological reciprocity, rather than in the accumulation of marketable goods (Moleka, 2026).

Similarly, *Ubuntu*, the Southern African philosophy often expressed as “I am because we are,” encapsulates a communalist ontology in which identity, personhood, and wellbeing are co-constituted through social relationships (Gade, 2012). *Ubuntu* articulates an ethical framework wherein human rights, social solidarity, and ecological care are inseparable. This relational ethics foregrounds the collective dimension of resilience, emphasizing mutual support, participatory governance, and communal problem-solving as primary determinants of societal health. Within such a framework, development cannot be abstracted to material indices alone; it must account for the quality of social bonds, the capacity for collective agency, and the vitality of ethical and ecological networks.

Indigenous African spiritual ontologies further deepen this relational understanding of value. Land, rivers, forests, and ancestors are frequently conceived as sentient actors or moral agents, generating duties and obligations for human communities (Olupona, 2014). These cosmologies embed environmental stewardship within ethical practice: harming a river or forest is simultaneously a moral transgression, a spiritual imbalance, and a threat to community wellbeing. African spiritual ecologies thus provide epistemic resources for regenerative thinking, illustrating that economic activity, ecological sustainability, and social ethics are inseparable dimensions of a flourishing society (Bergmann, Rigby & Scott, 2023). They highlight the possibility of post-extractive economies, where prosperity emerges through nurturing and maintaining ecological and social networks rather than through exploitative extraction (Moleka, 2025d).

Taken together, these African relational philosophies offer an epistemic corrective to GDP-centric frameworks. By reconceptualizing wealth and wellbeing as multidimensional, relational, and contextually grounded, they provide the theoretical foundation for post-GDP metrics and pluriversal approaches to development (Moleka, 2025e, 2025f, 2025g). They invite scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to move beyond extractive logics, to embrace ecological stewardship, relational solidarity, and spiritual responsibility as central components of prosperity. In doing so, they foreground a form of development that is regenerative, socially cohesive, and ecologically embedded, offering a pathway for African societies to articulate their own metrics of flourishing in ways that are both culturally authentic and globally instructive.



### 3. Informal Economies as Resilience Infrastructures

Informal economies in Africa are far more than residual, “unproductive” activities; they constitute adaptive infrastructures that sustain livelihoods, social cohesion, and ecological stewardship across diverse urban and rural lifeworlds. These systems operate through dense networks of reciprocity, knowledge exchange, and mutual obligation that effectively insulate communities from shocks such as market volatility, environmental stressors, and political instability. Social networks in informal economies, whether embedded in cooperative markets, rotating savings schemes, or neighborhood associations, function as distributed insurance mechanisms, providing both material and immaterial support during crises. Appadurai (2004) emphasizes that these networks are not merely transactional—they are relational, culturally grounded, and historically situated, reflecting local epistemologies of risk-sharing and interdependence. In practice, these networks mediate access to land, credit, information, and labor, thereby sustaining community continuity even under conditions of macroeconomic precarity.

Gendered care systems form a second crucial layer of resilience. Women’s networks in marketplaces, domestic economies, and caregiving spheres transmit social knowledge, organize collective childcare, manage food security, and maintain intergenerational continuity. These systems are not incidental; they are central to the ethical and economic fabric of African societies, ensuring that communal survival and social cohesion persist even when formal economic institutions fail (Momsen, 2010). The relational labor embedded in these networks—including caregiving, mentorship, and communal ritual—creates social capital that is both measurable and deeply qualitative, forming the backbone of adaptive capacity across cities and villages alike.

Digital micro-enterprises illustrate how informal systems are evolving in the twenty-first century. Mobile money platforms, hyperlocal e-commerce networks, and community innovation hubs augment traditional relational infrastructures with technological scaffolding. These digital tools expand market access, facilitate peer-to-peer learning, and enable rapid collective responses to environmental or economic shocks. In many African cities, digital informal networks act as incubators for resilience, blending ancient relational ethics with contemporary technological affordances.

Finally, ecological reciprocity underpins the environmental dimension of African informal economies. Smallholder farmers, pastoralists, and artisanal fishers routinely integrate land stewardship and resource conservation into their production strategies, creating sustainable loops that regenerate soil fertility, maintain water cycles, and preserve biodiversity. Far from being external to economic logic, ecological stewardship is central to the relational and cultural rationales guiding informal economic practice. These dynamics collectively demonstrate that informal economies are laboratories of relational innovation, offering insights for post-GDP indicator design that account for social, ecological, and cultural dimensions of value.

### 4. Pluriversal Wellbeing: A Conceptual Framework

Pluriversal wellbeing reconceptualizes prosperity as a multidimensional constellation that transcends narrow GDP-focused metrics, integrating ecological, social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions into a coherent framework. At its core is ecological embeddedness: human prosperity is inseparable from the health, regeneration, and sustainability of natural systems. African informal economies exemplify how relational knowledge, land management practices, and community labor cycles contribute to the regeneration of soils, forests, and water systems. This ecological orientation shifts the focus from extraction and accumulation to enhancement, repair, and stewardship.

Relational solidarity forms a second pillar of pluriversal wellbeing. Quality social networks, reciprocity, interdependence, and mutual accountability underpin communal resilience and individual flourishing. Drawing on Graeber (2001) and Appadurai (2004), these relational infrastructures are both ethical and practical: they enable collective problem-solving, intergenerational knowledge transmission, and the maintenance of social norms that sustain trust

and cooperation. In African urban centers, neighborhood associations, market cooperatives, and digital communities exemplify how relationality functions as a vital determinant of wellbeing.

Capabilities and agency constitute the third dimension, emphasizing the freedom to pursue meaningful lives in accordance with individual and communal aspirations. Building on Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2011), pluriversal wellbeing recognizes that autonomy, participatory governance, and access to resources are central to resilience. In informal economies, participation is not merely economic; it includes engagement in decision-making processes, cultural practices, and ecological stewardship, illustrating how relational and technical capacities intersect to produce flourishing.

Cultural and spiritual meaning-making represents a fourth, often neglected, pillar of wellbeing. African cosmologies, rituals, and ethical practices generate meaning, reinforce collective memory, and provide moral guidance for sustainable resource management. Spiritual ontologies, in particular, create ethical obligations toward ancestors, non-human beings, and future generations, embedding care for life within communal praxis (Olupona, 2014). These dimensions of value resist commodification and highlight the intrinsic worth of practices, relationships, and ecological integrity.

Finally, community resilience encapsulates the adaptive capacity of populations facing social, ecological, and economic shocks. Resilience is not solely a technical property of systems; it is socially constructed through trust, collective memory, shared norms, and flexible institutional arrangements. African informal economies exemplify how decentralized, relational, and participatory arrangements can buffer communities from crises while sustaining long-term generational continuity.

Together, these five dimensions—ecological embeddedness, relational solidarity, capabilities and agency, cultural-spiritual meaning, and community resilience—offer a holistic, multidimensional alternative to GDP-centric metrics. They form the conceptual basis for Pluriversal Wellbeing Matrices (PWM), which operationalize these principles for empirical measurement, policy design, and civilizational governance. By foregrounding the relational, ecological, and cultural dimensions of value, the pluriversal wellbeing framework positions African informalities as laboratories for post-GDP innovation, capable of guiding the emergence of indicators that reflect true human and ecological flourishing.

## 5. Pluriversal Wellbeing Matrices (PWM): Methodological Innovation

The Pluriversal Wellbeing Matrices (PWM) represent a methodological and conceptual advance in operationalizing African relational, ecological, and spiritual forms of prosperity. Unlike conventional development metrics, which reduce value to monetary aggregates or production output, the PWM is explicitly designed to capture multidimensional, context-specific, and relational forms of wellbeing. At its core, the PWM integrates quantitative, qualitative, and hybrid indicators to create a holistic mapping of community resilience, ecological stewardship, and relational flourishing. Quantitative data include ecological measures—such as soil fertility, water quality, biodiversity indices, and regenerative agriculture outputs—combined with social network metrics that capture patterns of reciprocity, density of mutual aid, and intergenerational knowledge transmission. Qualitative assessments complement these measures through ethnographic approaches, participatory observation, and semi-structured interviews that explore trust, communal cohesion, cultural continuity, and spiritual practices that sustain community wellbeing (Chambers, 2017; Appadurai, 2004).

Hybrid indices then synthesize ecological, social, and cultural dimensions, offering a dynamic representation of prosperity that is sensitive to temporal and spatial variability. This allows for the PWM to reflect emergent changes in informal economic networks, communal resource governance, and the adaptation of sociotechnical infrastructures to local needs. Crucially, the matrices are scalable: they can be applied at village, municipal, regional, or national levels while remaining sensitive to local epistemologies. In African urban contexts, for example, digital micro-enterprises, community cooperatives, and civic technology hubs can be integrated alongside ethnographic assessments of social solidarity and spiritual engagement. In rural settings, agroecological practices, customary ecological governance, and traditional knowledge systems provide rich data for PWM

application. Methodologically, the PWM embodies a post-GDP epistemic shift: from linear, extractive, and externally imposed metrics to participatory, relational, and pluriversal indicators of flourishing.

## 6. Case Studies from Urban and Rural Africa

Empirical evidence from various African cities and rural zones demonstrates that informal economies, social innovation, and community governance form the foundation for the Pluriversal Wellbeing Matrices (PWM).

### 6.1. Kinshasa, DRC — Urban Markets, Cooperatives, and Food Resilience

In Kinshasa, informal economic activities are central to urban food security. In the Ndjili commune, vegetable production, farmer cooperatives, informal markets, and artisanal activities provide broad access to fresh produce while maintaining networks of solidarity, employment, and intergenerational knowledge transfer (Resnick, Sivasubramanian, Idiong, & Ojo, 2023).

These markets and cooperatives act as resilience infrastructures, integrating subsistence production, local trade, artisan work, and social networks (family and community) that help communities survive economic shocks or supply chain disruptions (Resnick et al., 2023). Informal labor — street vending, neighborhood markets, and artisanal workshops — sustains the real economy where formal sectors are limited.

### 6.2. Lagos, Nigeria — Informal Entrepreneurial Ecosystems and Micro-Digital Enterprises

Lagos illustrates how informal economies can evolve into hybrid entrepreneurial ecosystems, combining technological innovation, micro-entrepreneurship, and informal markets. The ICT hub in Yaba, for example, functions as an innovation space where trust-based informal networks and diverse economic activities (technology, artisanal production, services, commerce) enable micro-enterprises to survive and innovate despite structural constraints (Vital entrepreneurial ecosystems, 2023).

Additionally, Lagos's informal food and commerce sectors — street vendors, local markets, and short supply chains connecting rural producers to urban consumers — form the backbone of urban food security and socio-economic resilience while providing livelihoods to vulnerable populations (Resnick et al., 2023).

### 6.3. Dakar, Senegal — Urban Informality and Cultural-Spiritual Livelihoods

In Dakar, urban informal economies — markets, small-scale businesses, artisanal activities, and services — not only generate income but also sustain social, cultural, and community networks. These activities reveal the cultural and spiritual dimensions of the economy: markets and informal associations maintain social cohesion, intergenerational solidarity, and ethical practices (Systematic Review of Informal Urban Economies, 2021).

The case of Dakar shows that development models based solely on formalization or industrialization fail to capture the complexity of African urban realities: informal economies are spaces of creativity, adaptation, solidarity, and collective survival (Sustainability, 2021).

### 6.4. Rural Africa — Agroecology, Cooperatives, and Community Governance

In rural African contexts, informal, cooperative, and community-based economic systems embody ecological governance, agroecology, and mutualism. Informal microfinance and savings groups, such as *chama* in Kenya, provide small farmers with access to resources, investment opportunities, and risk mitigation (Datta & Sahu, 2023).

Moreover, rural communities use traditional natural resource management systems — community forests, collective land stewardship, and agroforestry practices — that contribute to ecological resilience, food security, and social cohesion (Resnick et al., 2023). These dynamics

illustrate that informal and community-based logics are living laboratories of sustainability, adaptation, and pluriversal wellbeing, extending far beyond the scope of formal economic metrics.

## 7. Policy Implications: Rethinking Measurement, Governance, and Development

Transitioning to post-GDP governance in Africa requires fundamentally rethinking both epistemic frameworks and institutional infrastructures. First, community data systems must be recognized as legitimate instruments of oversight and planning. Participatory mapping, citizen-generated data, and local monitoring of ecological and social indicators empower communities to assert agency over the measurement of their own wellbeing. This approach counters historical epistemic injustices, whereby formal metrics systematically undervalued African informal economies, care work, and ecological stewardship (de Sousa Santos, 2014).

Second, relational statecraft emerges as a necessary mode of governance. Policies should prioritize cooperation, social solidarity, and ecological stewardship over extractive profit maximization. State interventions must support informal and hybrid economic structures while respecting communal and spiritual dimensions of wellbeing, recognizing that relational infrastructures are as crucial to resilience as material infrastructure.

Third, integration with formal planning processes is essential. Urban and rural planners must account for informal economies, ecological limits, and social networks, designing policies that harmonize infrastructural development with relational and ecological considerations. For instance, urban redevelopment projects can incorporate market cooperatives, communal gardens, and participatory water management systems into broader city planning frameworks.

Finally, international development agencies and donors must adopt pluriversal metrics to avoid epistemic imperialism. Reliance on GDP, narrow poverty metrics, or Western-centric development indicators risks perpetuating colonial epistemologies. By embracing frameworks such as the PWM, development cooperation can support locally grounded, relationally informed, and ecologically regenerative pathways that reflect African realities and priorities.

These policy orientations underscore the central thesis of the article: post-GDP indicators are not merely measurement tools—they are instruments for civilizational transformation, enabling societies to operationalize relational, ecological, and cultural values at scale.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that Africa's informal economies, relational philosophies, and pluriversal epistemologies provide one of the most fertile foundations for imagining and operationalizing a post-GDP paradigm of human flourishing. Conventional metrics, anchored in GDP and its derivative frameworks, fail to account for the complexity, creativity, and relational vitality of African lifeworlds. By contrast, the lens of pluriversal wellbeing—grounded in ecological embeddedness, relational solidarity, capabilities, cultural-spiritual meaning, and community resilience—reveals that African societies already cultivate multidimensional forms of prosperity that elude conventional classification.

Across Kinshasa, Lagos, Dakar, and rural agroecological communities, informal economies function not as marginal or “shadow” sectors but as core infrastructures of societal resilience. They embody adaptive governance systems, gendered care networks, sociotechnical innovation, and ecological reciprocity that sustain life in contexts marked by economic volatility, political uncertainty, and climate instability. These findings affirm that informal logics are not remnants of a pre-modern past but living laboratories of civilizational innovation, offering insights into decentralized resilience, community-based resource management, and regenerative economic practice.

The introduction of Pluriversal Wellbeing Matrices (PWM) thus represents more than a technical methodology: it is a call for epistemic transformation. The PWM repositions African knowledge systems—from *bumuntu* and *ubuntu* to spiritual ecologies and cooperative governance—as legitimate sources for rethinking global metrics of prosperity. By integrating ecological data,



relational indicators, social networks, and cultural-spiritual values, the PWM challenges the hegemony of extractive, linear, and reductive metrics that have long shaped development discourse. Instead, it invites policymakers, scholars, and communities to adopt a relational and pluriversal vision of development that aligns measurement with lived experience, ecological reality, and social justice.

Looking ahead, the shift toward post-GDP governance in Africa requires institutional courage and intellectual humility. Governments must recognize community-generated data and participatory monitoring systems as foundational knowledge infrastructures. Development agencies must abandon narrow quantitative indicators in favor of plural, culturally grounded frameworks. Urban and rural planning must integrate informal markets, cooperative governance, and ecological stewardship into policy design. Academic research must deepen engagement with African epistemologies of value, moving beyond extractivist knowledge production toward collaborative, community-rooted inquiry.

Africa stands not at the margins but at the vanguard of global post-GDP transformation. Its informal economies, spiritual ecologies, and relational ethics offer pathways for reimagining prosperity in an era of planetary crisis. The continent's pluriversal traditions challenge the global community to rethink what it means to flourish, to regenerate, and to live well. By embracing plural, relational, and ecological indicators—embodied in frameworks such as the PWM—Africa contributes not only to its own developmental horizons but to a broader civilizational reorientation toward regenerative and relational futures.

Africa's post-GDP innovations thus hold significance far beyond the continent. They illuminate the possibility of a new civilizational metric, one that values not only what economies produce but how societies sustain life, nurture relationships, and regenerate the Earth. In this sense, Africa offers the world an invitation: to measure differently, to know differently, and ultimately, to live differently.

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