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## Full Length Article

# Community caregivers' perspectives of community well-being in a mining community



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## ABSTRACT

Mining communities throughout the Southern African Development Community are faced with numerous challenges impacting on their wellbeing. As part of an integrative multidisciplinary research project, this study sought to explore aspects that affect community wellbeing in the informal Bekkersdal mining community in South Africa from the perspective of local community caregivers. An explorative-descriptive qualitative study including 22 mainly female (91%) participants who were purposively sampled was conducted. As part of data collection, participants answered a series of open-ended questions in a questionnaire and kept journals. Thematic analysis was used to analyze that data. The results indicate aspects that either promote (contribute to) or hinder community wellbeing.

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## 1. Introduction

This study formed part of an Integrative Multidisciplinary (IMD) community engagement project, which has the following major objectives in mind: 1) Conducting IMD research on the Eco health and well-being status of communities – especially from a humanities and social sciences perspective; 2) Determining the broader Eco health and well-being status of the Bekkersdal community. In this article, the authors provide background information on community

well-being, the Bekkersdal mining community, the IMD project under which this research was conducted, and the present study. The main emphasis of the discussion to follow will be to reveal the perspectives of community caregivers of Bekkersdal with regard to the community's well-being.

### 1.1. Community well-being

Community well-being is defined as a combination of social-, economic-, environmental-, cultural-, and political conditions that a community identifies as necessary in order for them to

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fulfill their potential (Wiseman & Brasher, 2008). Well-being based on a sustainable livelihood perspective, includes the assets and strengths, as well as the vulnerability of people in coping with adversity and sustaining the quality of life that they have achieved (Rakodi, 2014). In addition, Keyes (1998) refers to social well-being as the ability to interact successfully or coexist peacefully in a community. This article focuses on the community well-being of Bekkersdal.

## 1.2. Bekkersdal

Bekkersdal is a township that has been in existence since 1949 within the present day Westonaria municipal region of the Gauteng Province, South Africa. Bekkersdal does not only face some unique historical complexities, but also has to address challenges similar to those that other local townships experience. These challenges include extensive urban development, complexities in asset management, soaring poverty rates, unemployment and concomitant escalating crime, as well as the culture of non-payment for services by the community (Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), 2011; Van Eeden, 2014; Westonaria Local Municipality, 2013). A growing flare of informal establishments around the original Bekkersdal gained momentum since the late 1960s and by the 1980s had extensively escalated to about 70,000 residents (Housing Development Agency (HDA), 2012; Van Eeden, 2014). Since then, the population has further increased to 94,000 as the 2011 census calculated (Institute of Race Relations (IRR), 2013; Stats SA, 2011). A declining mining sector, geo-technological complexities, unavailability of scarce resources, electricity tariff escalation, inadequate resources to deal with increasing demands (Westonaria Local Municipality, 2013), as well as social upheavals such as protests and boycotts (Aboobaker & Matlala, 2013; Poplak, 2014), also contribute to the difficulties that inhabitants of the township experience (Van Eeden, 2014). Evidence is also suggestive of the risks associated with rural-to-urban migration, including negative health outcomes (Gerritsen et al., 2013), poor mental health, the experience of stress, risky sexual behavior (Yu, et al., 2016) and criminal activity (Olufemi, 2011).

Rapid, uncontrolled, and unplanned growth of the informal settlement resulted in intense pressure on existing services. The government and local municipality initially designed those services for the limited population of the Bekkersdal formal settlement. Van Eeden (2014, 2015) indicates that these services currently have to attempt to meet the demands of the vastly expanding informal settlement, which may be defined as a colony of people on land which is unplanned and has not been surveyed or proclaimed as being suitable for residential purposes and which consists mainly of informal dwellings (HDA, 2013). These unauthorised dwellings, which are also known as shacks, are makeshift structures that are not intended as permanent dwellings and have not been approved by a local authority (HDA, 2013). As a result of this, the scenario in Bekkersdal is so precarious that one reporter recently labeled the township as one of the most controversial and violence-driven communities in South Africa (Poplak, 2014; Van Eeden, 2014).

As mentioned earlier, the Bekkersdal community relies heavily on the local goldmines to boost the area's economy,

but due to a decline in gold production and retrenchments in the past two to three decades, the community's well-being has been negatively impacted (News24, 2002; Van Eeden, 2014, 2015). Many mineworkers that live in the Bekkersdal community are currently unemployed and eke out an existence in environmentally polluted conditions (Van Eeden, 2008, 2011).

In general, research confirms that mining activities, amongst others, have contributed to environmental degradation and contamination, which in turn leads to different types of pollution and concomitant health problems (e.g. respiratory ailments) experienced by people who live in or near such areas (Edmeston, 2010; Radio Netherlands Worldwide, 2012; Utembe, Faustman, Matatiele, & Gulumian, 2015). Recent literature speculates on the possible effects of polluted water and mine drainage in the broader Upper-Wonderfonteinsspruit environment near which especially the Bekkersdal informal settlement is situated (Coetzee, Winde, & Wade, 2006; Environment News South Africa, 2010; Liefferink, 2015; Winde, 2009). The adjacent Donaldson Dam in the Upper-Wonderfonteinsspruit, for example, is known for the unacceptably high levels of radioactivity in its sediment (Liefferink, 2015; Winde, 2009).

Utembe et al. (2015) indicate that mining in South Africa is associated with various chemical and health hazards. Amongst others, the dust that is produced as a result of mining, can result in a variety of pathological effects and mining and processing of minerals can result in exposure to toxic substances such as platinum, chromium, vanadium, and so forth (Utembe et al., 2015). Other authors also point to the possible harmful effects of mining and report that when inhaled, the dust produced by mining can cause irritation of the upper respiratory tract and is an important risk factor for many respiratory diseases, such as silicosis, silico-tuberculosis, pulmonary tuberculosis, obstructive airways disease and asthma (Ross & Murray, 2004). Furthermore, the mining and processing of minerals is also found to be hazardous. Utembe et al. (2015) point out that the method used in South Africa for the purpose of processing utilizes cyanide and that the technique used can contaminate soil and water. Phakedi (2010) states that dispersion modeling suggests that as many as tens of thousands of residents in Johannesburg that live in areas adjacent to tailings may be exposed to atmospheric cyanide concentrations that are above international standards as a result of this mineral processing technique.

It was against this background that the IMD research team initially became interested in the Bekkersdal community since it made it apparent that research was required on the well-being of the informal Bekkersdal community in order to gain insight into the community's state of well-being. Preliminary literature searches by the team supported this need as research on community well-being within the context of the Bekkersdal community was very limited. The research team therefore aimed to investigate the condition of the informal community by means of themes such as local governance, community, economic, ecological, social, physical, and emotional well-being. Preliminary investigation in this project revealed an additional high-risk situation in the western parts of the informal section of Bekkersdal, namely the dwellings established on dolomite rock formations known

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