

2025 ANNUAL REPORT

A comprehensive overview of our achievements for the year.



UNIVERSITY of the WESTERN CAPE
IYUNIVESITHI yaseNTSHONA KOLONI
UNIVERSITEIT van WES-KAAPLAND



PUG
Politics & Urban Governance
Research

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MESSAGE FROM THE PUG TEAM

As we reflect on the past year, we recognise it as a period of consolidation, momentum, and deepened engagement. This report captures the continued growth of PUG, highlighting the work we have undertaken, the partnerships we have built and strengthened, and the shared commitments that drives our research and practice.

Building on the foundations laid previously, 2025 saw us secure a number of new research grants and seed funding opportunities. These have enabled the development of early career researchers through targeted workshops, and strengthened our efforts to relocate at-risk student activists.

A key area of growth has been our ongoing contribution to building a network of universities and civil society organisations working on the protection of democratic values and human rights.

We continued to invest in spaces for learning and exchange. Our second Summer School and fellowship for Human Rights Defenders created opportunities for reflection, skills development, and collaboration across contexts. Alongside this, we hosted and participated in a range of workshops, conferences, and public events, contributing to ongoing conversations on democracy, governance, and social justice.

Our partnerships remain central to our work. Over the past year, we have both deepened existing collaborations and established new relationships, including through the Matariki Network of Universities, as well as connecting with colleagues at Queen's University in Canada, Ruhr University Bochum, Durham University, University of Cape Verde, the University of Western Australia and Mzumbe University. These partnerships enrich our research and expand the reach and relevance of our work.

It was a productive year across multiple fronts. The team advanced a strong body of published outputs, undertook extensive fieldwork, and curated events that brought research into dialogue with policy and practice. Notable among these was our engagement with the Mayor of Cape Town on sanitation in Khayelitsha, as well as a PhotoVoice exhibition that foregrounded community perspectives and lived experiences in Alexandra in Johannesburg.

None of this would be possible without the dedication and care of our partners and funders. Their commitment continues to contribute to the impact of our work. We are grateful for their ongoing support as we continue to grow and build towards our shared goals.

MEET OUR TEAM



Fiona Anciano
PUG Research Head;
Programme lead:
Democracy and
Citizenship



Mmeli Dube
Programme lead: Human
Rights; PUG Research
Management



Christina Culwick Fatti
Programme lead: Urban
Governance; PUG
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Michaelyn Cornelius
Project Coordinator



Nheo Fumba
Project Coordinator



Babongile Bidla
Researcher, Website and
Social Media Manager



Sindisa Monakali
Research Assistant



Boitumelo Papane
Research Assistant



Motshwaedi Sepeng
Postdoctoral Research
Fellow

ADVISORY BOARD



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Cape Town



Prof. Paul Gready
UNESCO Chair in
Protection of Human
Rights Defenders,
University of York



Prof. Charlotte Lemanski
Department of
Geography, University of
Cambridge

MISSION STATEMENT

PUG's mission is to link marginalised voices with power holders and decision-makers through a platform centred on research excellence.

OUR OBJECTIVES

- 1** Better understand all forms of governance in vulnerable or marginalised communities through building long-term research partnerships.
- 2** Use our research as a platform to link residents to decision-makers and power holders. We foster participatory spaces that support inclusive debate.
- 3** Influence decision-makers and policies related to democracy, urban governance and human rights through research, inclusive dialogue and co-design.
- 4** Build a platform to expand opportunities for collaborative international research and publishing.
- 5** Provide opportunities for emerging scholars and post-graduate students to develop research experience and networks.

VALUE-BASED RATIONALES

Five value-based rationales guide PUG's research, how we work and our impact:

- 1. Empirical** - We conduct long-term, inclusive research embedded in postgraduate training to help those in positions of power better understand and address the realities of marginalised communities, making our findings accessible to policymakers with the goal of driving meaningful change.
- 2. Theoretical** - We develop critical and nuanced theories of social justice, human rights and citizenship by challenging conventional frameworks, exposing complex power dynamics, and advancing approaches to governing transitions that resist simplistic solutions and avoid reinforcing systemic injustice.
- 3. Methodological** - We co-create knowledge with diverse participants and partners, working with marginalised communities through participatory, mixed-methods research. We use participatory action research methods like PhotoVoice, WhatsApp Diaries, and Storytelling — and support pluralistic, context-sensitive urban research by embedding these approaches into our regular methods training.
- 4. Epistemological** - We centre knowledge from the margins to shape urban scholarship and influence decision-making, reimagining the role of universities in addressing urban crises and expanding democratic spaces through support for early-career researchers and human rights defenders.

GOALS

Based on our mission, objectives and rationales PUG has five medium to long-term goals.

Goal 1: Research Excellence

To enhance the quality and impact of social sciences research, and foster research excellence, PUG will:

- Embrace innovative research methodologies;
- Align research activities with the University and Faculty strategic objectives;
- Increase publication in high-impact journals and books;
- Foster interdisciplinary and international research collaborations; and
- Secure competitive research funding.

Goal 2: Talent Development

To meet our objectives, we need to attract, retain and develop top-tier researchers and support staff, and capacitate students. To achieve this we will:

- Provide research and work opportunities for emerging scholars and post-graduate students;
- Link PUG research to the Department of Political Studies' new Work-Integrated Learning Masters programme through research internships;
- Implement comprehensive professional development programs for staff;
- Create a mentoring system for early-career researchers; and
- Provide leadership by established researchers.

Goal 3: Infrastructure and Resources

We will upgrade and expand research facilities and resources by:

- Developing digital infrastructure to support research activities;
- Ensuring access to essential databases, archives, and libraries; and
- Providing workspaces and administrative support for researchers.

Goal 4: Knowledge Transfer and Collaboration

We will enhance PUG's visibility and impact through dissemination and partnerships. To do this, we will:

- Work closely with community-based organisations in marginalised areas;
- Organise and participate in conferences, workshops, and seminars;
- Strengthen collaborations with government and academic institutions by continuing to work with the Cities of Cape Town and Johannesburg, and maintaining partnerships with the African Centre for Cities at UCT, the Gauteng City Region Observatory and others; and
- Continue to internationalise and build links across Africa, the Global South and beyond, including maintaining existing strong ties with the Participedia network, Cambridge University, the University of Sheffield, the UNESCO Chair on Protection of Democratic Space and Human Rights Defenders, among others.

Goal 5: Financial Sustainability

We will ensure the long-term financial health of the centre by:

- Continuing to secure external third-stream research funding;
- Continuing to secure funds for postgraduate bursaries for students enrolled in faculty programmes relevant to PUG's research areas; and
- Maintaining a robust financial management system.
- Maintaining a contingency fund to support core staff salaries.



PUG'S KEY HIGHLIGHTS IN 2025

- Through the African Universities Hub for Human Rights program, we hosted six fellows in 2025, enabling UWC to become one of the first African Universities to offer rest and respite to human rights defenders (HRDs).
- Hosted the annual summer school for HRDs, bringing together 24 HRDs from 15 African countries.
- Worked with activists in the United Kingdom and Columbia and produced our first film based on 14 stories on urban crisis.
- Co-hosted a workshop with the City of Cape Town and BM Section residents in Khayelitsha to address challenges in sanitation service delivery, particularly around container-based toilets.
- Connected with 25 researchers from 21 universities across the globe through the PAR-CITY project.
- Appointed to facilitate a Citizens' Assembly for 2026, which would make UWC the first university in Africa to host one.
- Produced seven journal articles, eight blogs, three newsletters and hosted two seminars.
- Professor Fiona Anciano presented her inaugural lecture and was awarded the SARChI Chair in Democracy and Citizenship.
- Hosted three interns from the Political Studies department, two of whom were part of the inaugural work-based learning Master's degree.

PUG'S 2025 INTERNSHIP PROGRAMME

From August to November 2025, PUG hosted three interns, Charline King, Lindelwa Mayinga and Omphemetse Morake. We would like to thank them for their contributions to the team. Their reflections of their internship are below:



Lindelwa Mayinga

"My internship at PUG since August has been a rewarding experience. Working on the Caring for the Other Half project introduced me to fieldwork for the first time. I met inspiring people both at PUG and in the field, my confidence and writing skills have immensely improved, and I am encouraged to publish my work. It was a truly empowering journey."



Charline King

"The journey with PUG over the past few months has been nothing short of rewarding. I was exposed to the extent of investment and sacrifice it really takes being a Human Rights Defender in the African context. [...] Further, it is also worth noting that the various tasks I have been entrusted with have enlarged the capacity of my skills and allowed me the opportunity to be more adaptable as I was encouraged to often engage with Fellows of a different language and culture."



Omphemetse Morake

"As a young student navigating this reality, I've discovered both the chaos and growth that come with trying to study and work at the same time. Like many of my peers, I entered this internship with no prior work experience. That's not unusual — the paradox of "needing experience to get experience" is a major barrier for thousands of young South Africans. Work-Integrated Learning is different from employability. It prepares young people, like me, for the realities of the job market."

SPOTLIGHT ON:

Professor Fiona Anciano's Inaugural Lecture

PUG congratulates Prof. Fiona Anciano for her recent inaugural lecture at UWC on 4 September 2025. Prof. Anciano's lecture, 'Beyond the Ballot: Rethinking Urban Governance in the Shadows of Democracy', reflected on her research, providing insights into the relationship between urban governance and democracy in an era of crisis and inequality. Watch the full lecture [here](#)

Beyond the Ballot: Rethinking Urban Governance in the Shadows of Democracy

Who governs when the state does not deliver? How does this mesh with democracy in principle and practice? South Africa is known for its strong civil society and celebrated democratic ethos. Yet, the governance systems introduced during the democratic transition have largely failed to deliver economic freedom. This lecture brings together two conceptual frameworks - urban governance and participatory democracy - to examine both the promises and the pitfalls of democracy in contemporary South African cities.

It reflects on how urban governance actually functions, and who holds the power to shape the city, when citizens feel increasingly disconnected from the outcomes of formal democratic processes. The talk will draw on two decades of innovative participatory research with marginalized residents in South African cities, using visual material from methods such as Photovoice and storytelling.

Collectively, these conceptual frameworks and qualitative data indicate that strengthening democratic governance to achieve more justice-oriented service delivery requires an in-depth understanding of the nature, practices, and potential of joint governance - which may be collaborative or conflictual - between government, residents and civil society.

Neither state-centric approaches, with their reliance on technical policy solutions, nor formal democratic processes alone have produced just and sustainable service delivery. Instead, I reflect on the role of informal governance and how it contributes to what can be termed a participatory patchwork democracy — a form of everyday democratic practice that builds meaningfully on South Africa's democratic ethos.



PUG staff left to right: Lindelwa Mayinga, Mmeli Dube, Sindisa Monakali, Prof. Fiona Anciano, Michaelyn Cornelius, Charlene King, Nheo Fumba and Babongile Bidla

RESEARCH PROGRAMMES: OUTPUTS AND ACTIVITIES

PUG's Three Research Programmes:

HUMAN RIGHTS

**URBAN
GOVERNANCE**

**CITIZENSHIP AND
DEMOCRACY**

The Politics and Urban Governance (PUG) Research Group connects research on urban politics to people's lived experiences. It upholds a commitment to integrity, collaboration and social impact. PUG's research is grouped into three broad research programmes with various projects under these programmes.



HUMAN RIGHTS

Through the African Universities Hub for Human Rights, we leverage our research capacity to provide thought leadership, human rights protection and democracy. The Africa Hub serves as a space for incubation and reflection, connecting activism and academia to support human rights defenders, students and scholars in shaping and influencing their political contexts. The following section presents our active 2025 projects.

Fellowship

August to October 2025

In 2025 the Africa Hub continued with its Protective Fellowship programme for Human Rights Defenders (HRDs), adapting to the changing realities across the African continent. The programme expanded from three Fellows in 2024 to six in 2025. This step was shaped by both the needs of HRDs and the evolving risks they faced. This growth was possible through collaboration with African Defenders, who supported two Fellows, Front Line Defenders, who supported one Fellow and the Africa Hub supporting three Fellows.

Collaboration with the Institute of Healing of Memories continued providing the fellows with psychosocial support. These collaborations enabled the Africa Hub to draw from a wider pool of HRDs and contributed to a more diverse cohort. The selected Fellows, from Cameroon, Kenya, Libya, and Zambia, brought a range of perspectives and unique needs that helped the programme better understand the pressures shaping human rights work across different political environments.



Human Rights Defenders Protective Fellowship second cohort. From left, Jordin, Nheo Fumba (PUG staff), Mousa Kouri, Mary Maacah, Ekaale Epakan, Hawah Kone and Memory Banda.

Student Placement

25 November to 5 December 2025

Through the African Hub, PUG hosted a two-week research placement program for post-graduate students from the University of York in November-December 2025. The students' research aimed to examine how university-based protection programmes, such as the Africa hub, can effectively support HRDs in relatively democratic contexts like South Africa. The placement is designed to enable students to develop research skills and gain experience in fieldwork in Africa. The findings will partially inform the Africa Hub's programming and collaboration with activists in South Africa, while maintaining its continental scope.



York University students and coordinator with Africa Hub team. Back row left to right: Mmeli Dube, Sam Hyde, Lewis Fussey, Logan Mort. Front row left to right: Pippa Copper, Minami Yamashita, Adriana Chaves and Nheo Fumba

HUMAN RIGHTS

AUH Summer School 29 September to 3 October 2025

A total of 24 participants from 15 countries attended the 2025 Summer School. This diverse group of human rights defenders, academics, activists, and practitioners from across Africa, reflected the regional inclusivity of the Summer School, which took place against the backdrop of continued threats to HRDs in Africa. The Summer School explored how the global political shifts are affecting democracy and human rights, shared knowledge and skills for strengthening resilience and mitigating risk for HRDs.

Keynote speakers included Deprose Machena, Director of the Resources Futures in Africa initiative at the Open Society Foundations, who highlighted the importance of continued learning for HRDs, for them to effectively confront increasingly complex challenges. UWC Rector and Vice-Chancellor, Professor Robert Balfour, in a speech presented on his behalf by the Deputy Dean of EMS Faculty, Professor Derek Yu, reflected on the pressures facing African youth and the role of higher education in defending democracy. Prof Balfour's statement emphasised that universities had both a moral and academic responsibility to protect academic freedom.



URBAN GOVERNANCE

Urban governance is a complex and multifaceted process involving diverse stakeholders, ranging from local government to the private sector and community leaders, and requires balancing economic, social, environmental, and political considerations, especially in South Africa's highly diverse urban landscape. Our Urban Governance research programme examines the multiple ways in which these various elements interact with each other and influence decision-making processes. We adopt a range of research methodologies, including participatory methods, to understand the relationships between different actors, who holds power and how decisions are made within different contexts. This research aims to better understand the multiple forms of urban governance that influence how cities can support more equitable and sustainable futures and improve the lives of citizens. The following section presents our active 2025 projects.

CARING FOR THE OTHER HALF: STRENGTHENING SANITATION GOVERNANCE TO IMPROVE MENSTRUAL HEALTH IN URBAN INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS

This interdisciplinary pilot project explores how the governance of publicly provided sanitation in urban informal settlements shapes women's experiences of menstrual health. Framed by the recognition of menstrual health as a human right, the project moves beyond product- and infrastructure-focused approaches to examine the broader systems, social dynamics, and everyday practices that influence access to safe, dignified sanitation. Using Participatory Action Research (PAR) in Khayelitsha, Cape Town, the project centres women's lived experiences to better understand and inform more responsive and inclusive policy and practice.

In 2025, the project undertook primary fieldwork in BM Section, Khayelitsha, including in-depth interviews and a PhotoVoice project with women residents. A participant feedback session was held to validate emerging findings and inform outputs, including a policy-oriented pamphlet shared with City of Cape Town officials. The team also convened an in-person workshop to analyse data, refine key themes, and identify future research directions, supported by ongoing online collaboration. Visit the [project page](#) to find out more.

Team Workshop and PhotoVoice Interviews

From 22–24 October 2025, we held an in-person team workshop to collectively analyse the data, refine emerging themes, and identify future research directions and gaps to inform subsequent work.

During this period, we also conducted PhotoVoice interviews with women in BM Section, Khayelitsha, Cape Town, exploring their experiences of menstruation and sanitation in an informal settlement context.



Sanitation in BM-section, Khayelitsha

URBAN GOVERNANCE

Governing the Just Urban Transition

As water and electricity insecurity intensifies in South African cities, the need for environmentally sustainable and socially just transitions is increasingly urgent. Limited access to essential services deepens inequality and everyday struggles, emphasising the importance of more inclusive urban development pathways. The NRF-funded Governing the Just Urban Transition (GoJUT) project explores these challenges and the complexities of achieving more just urban futures.

In 2025, the project successfully completed the majority of planned fieldwork, including interviews and PhotoVoice research in Alexandra and Khayelitsha, as well as interviews with government officials and other key stakeholders. Two Master's students submitted their dissertations, while two PhD students progressed through approved proposals and fieldwork.

Team Workshop

In April 2025, the GoJUT team met at UWC for a workshop. Team members had the opportunity to present their individual projects and receive feedback. The workshop also provided space to discuss key theoretical debates related to the project, along with training in fieldwork, data analysis and writing. The team spent an afternoon in Khayelitsha, engaging with on-the-ground issues around access to basic services and speaking with the owner of a small hardware enterprise. The workshop helped individuals situate their research within the broader project, offered valuable training for the team's postgraduate students, and created space to share strategies for time management, writing and publishing.



Participant telling the story behind his photos about his business.

PhotoVoice Stories of Water and Energy Exhibition, October 2025

On 28 October 2025, the GoJUT project hosted a Photovoice exhibition at the City Forum event in Johannesburg, which was co-hosted with Wits University's Center for Urbanism and Built Environment (CUBES) Kelvin Alexandra-Frankenwald City Studio. GoJUT research participants from Setswetla, Alexandra, shared their photovoice stories about how their businesses in the informal settlement use and access water and energy.



Team Workshop left to right: Rogini Naidoo, Asemahle Mahlunwana, Sbahle Cele, Samkelisiwe Khanyile, James Clacherty, Mamokete Modiba, Motshwaedi Sepeng, Charlotte Lemanski, Christina Culwick Fatti, Fiona Anciano, Boitumelo Papane.

URBAN GOVERNANCE

Interrogating Urban Crisis Representation and Response

We are living in an era of global crisis, yet state and external responses in cities are often problematic, as the Covid pandemic revealed. Faced with disasters or conflict, top-down responses may not be sensitive to local contexts, and may worsen conditions for marginalised communities. This project explored local perspectives and experiences of diverse types of crisis in urban areas, focusing on the lived experiences of marginalised communities. It looked at how crisis representations and crisis responses are related, in order to assess the effectiveness of crisis responses, and suggest improvements.

Methodologically we used storytelling, interviews and media analysis to compare representations and responses in four cities in South Africa and Colombia: Cape Town, Johannesburg, Cali and Buenaventura. Participants in the storytelling workshops are members of the three partner organisations: SERI, Equal Education and Project90 by 2030. Visit the [project page](#) to find out more.

Team Workshop

In June 2025, the Crisis Representation Project team gathered at UWC's Iyatsiba Lab for a collaborative workshop with NGO partners, focusing on storytelling themes from 2024 fieldwork in South Africa and Colombia. The team conducted site visits, analysed narratives, and co-developed outputs—including a short film featuring resident-created stories on state absence, violence, and youth experiences in Cape Town, Johannesburg, Cali, and Buenaventura.



Left to Right: Natalie Mc Askill, Melanie Lombard, Charlotte Lemanski, Carlos Andres Tobar Tovar, Vanessa Concha Valderrama, Makanatsa Ziyambi, Adriel Galvan & Babongile Bilda

URBAN GOVERNANCE

Improving Communication to Improve Services: Strengthening Sanitation Servicing in Informal Settlements

This project focuses on how the City of Cape Town (CCT) can better understand, engage, and respond to the needs and imaginaries of residents in informal settlements in relation to sanitation provision. The research explored what type of resident-state engagement platforms residents of informal settlements desire and how this relates to current CCT communication platforms. The case study site was BM Section in Khayelitsha. Methods included focus groups with residents; workshops with residents of BM Section and CCT; tracking of servicing requests by residents and a resident survey. We found that residents would strongly prefer to report service requests to a person rather than through digital channels.

Most digital channels are not known about or user friendly to residents, due to poor information sharing and high data costs or lack of access to WiFi. The most promising digital channel for logging requests is WhatsApp. Even when provided with data, residents did not use digital channels to report faults. Residents would however like to be more involved in the servicing chain, by for example, being trained to provide repairs. There was a strong desire for a more engaged form of communication, beyond information sharing and towards co-creation of solutions. Visit the project page to find out more.

Service Delivery Workshop with Mayor in Khayelitsha

In May 2025, PUG co-hosted a workshop with the City of Cape Town and BM Section residents in Khayelitsha to address challenges in sanitation service delivery, particularly around container-based toilets. The session enabled direct dialogue between residents and city officials, leading to co-created solutions for improving fault reporting and service responsiveness. Find out more [here](#).



Photo Supplied by Mayor's Office: Image of BM Section Residents with Mayor Geordin Hill-Lewis, MMC Zahid Badroodien, and City of Cape Town Officials.

CITIZENSHIP AND DEMOCRACY

Democracy is a pillar of South African society, reflecting a powerful legacy of human rights, and citizen-led transformation. Yet, as seen globally, its strength is in its practice—not merely its structure. PUG believes that to understand democracy’s real impact, especially in South Africa’s urban spaces inhabited by extreme inequalities, from wealthy elites to low-income communities, we need to examine both local and comparative practices of participatory democracy and participatory governance. By exploring democratic practices across diverse contexts, we can uncover new strategies to amplify citizens’ voices and promote governance models that prioritise dignity and social equity. In a country known for its Constitutional commitment to equality, we must continue to evaluate and refine our democratic practices, ensuring that all South Africans can experience the promise of democracy in both policy and daily life. The following section presents our active 2025 projects.

Participedia

Participedia serves as an open-sourced online research tool that compiles articles and case studies on participatory democracy. It provides comparative information on governance experiences across different contexts. Participedia has produced various outputs, including case studies, research articles, and educational materials that support the understanding and implementation of participatory democracy. The platform is continually updated with new contributions from its global network. Prof Anciano is the co-Chair of the Democratic Accountability Cluster in Participedia.

As part of post-graduate modules taught at the Political Studies Department at UWC, Masters Students developed cases on participatory innovations in Africa to showcase more cases of participatory methods in Africa. Read the cases developed by [University of the Western Cape Students](#).

Participedia Workshop: Participation, Representation and Informality, 27-28 March 2025

The Canada Research Chair in Participation and Citizenship of the department of political science at the Université de Montréal hosted Prof. Fiona Anciano at the international workshop Participation, Representation and Informality. Fiona presented a paper, entitled ‘Bridging the Gap: Making the Case for Informal Representation in South Africa’.



Participants in the Participedia workshop in Montreal, March 2025.

CITIZENSHIP AND DEMOCRACY

Cape Town's Citizens' Assembly

In response to the growing political and scholarly interest in citizens' assemblies as a potential response to the ongoing crisis of democracy, the Centre for Research on Democracy (CREDO) at Stellenbosch University, in partnership with PUG has convened a Citizens' Assembly Working Group. Composed of an interdisciplinary cohort of African and international scholars, the working group will host South Africa's first citizens' assembly. A citizens' assembly (CA) is an innovative democratic process which is quickly gaining popularity worldwide. Emphasising inclusion, informed discussion, and consensus-based decisions, a citizens' assembly gathers together a representative group of citizens over a number of days to learn about, deliberate on, and put forward recommendations on an important policy issue affecting their community.

In most cases, participants are guided throughout the process by trained facilitators who help ensure quality deliberation, and subject experts who inform citizens on the issue at hand. Advocates of citizens' assemblies argue that they provide a platform to engage ordinary citizens, reflecting the diversity of interests and perspectives of the general public, in decision-making processes which are usually the exclusive domain of politicians and interest groups. We will host the CA at UWC in Cape Town between August and October 2026.

PAR-City Project

PAR-CITY examines how and why cities respond to the key democratic challenges of our times. The project aims to understand how urban participatory innovations transform democracy, trust and governance.

The three year project brings together a diverse set of international researchers to tackle democratic challenges, including 25 researchers from 21 universities across seven major cities: Buenos Aires, Cape Town, Lyon, New York, São Paulo, Toronto, and Warsaw.

The project has three primary objectives:

1. To establish the empirical significance of cities in responding to the global challenges of democracy, governance, and trust (DGT).
2. To examine the role of digital media, tools, and technologies in either eroding or strengthening DGT in large cities.
3. To advance concepts, models, and theories of DGT through the central notion of Urban Participatory Innovations (UPIs).

PAR-CITY Workshop in London

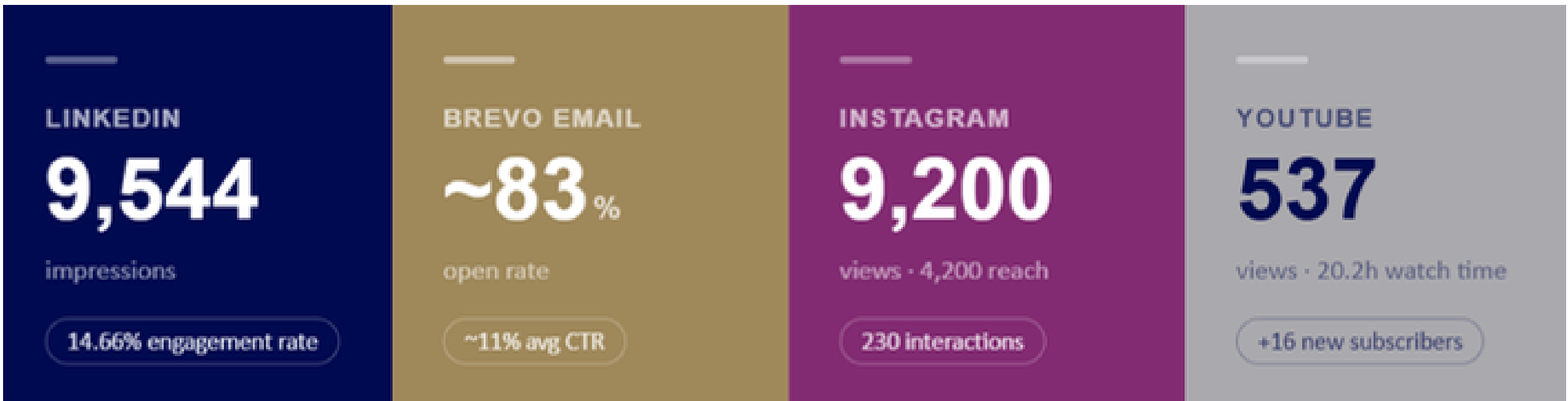
In June 2025, Fiona Anciano joined the PAR-City workshop at Queen Mary University to collaborate on urban participatory innovations and strengthen global ties for advancing urban democracy. Visit the [project page](#) to find out more.



Participants in the PAR-CITY workshop in London, June 2025.

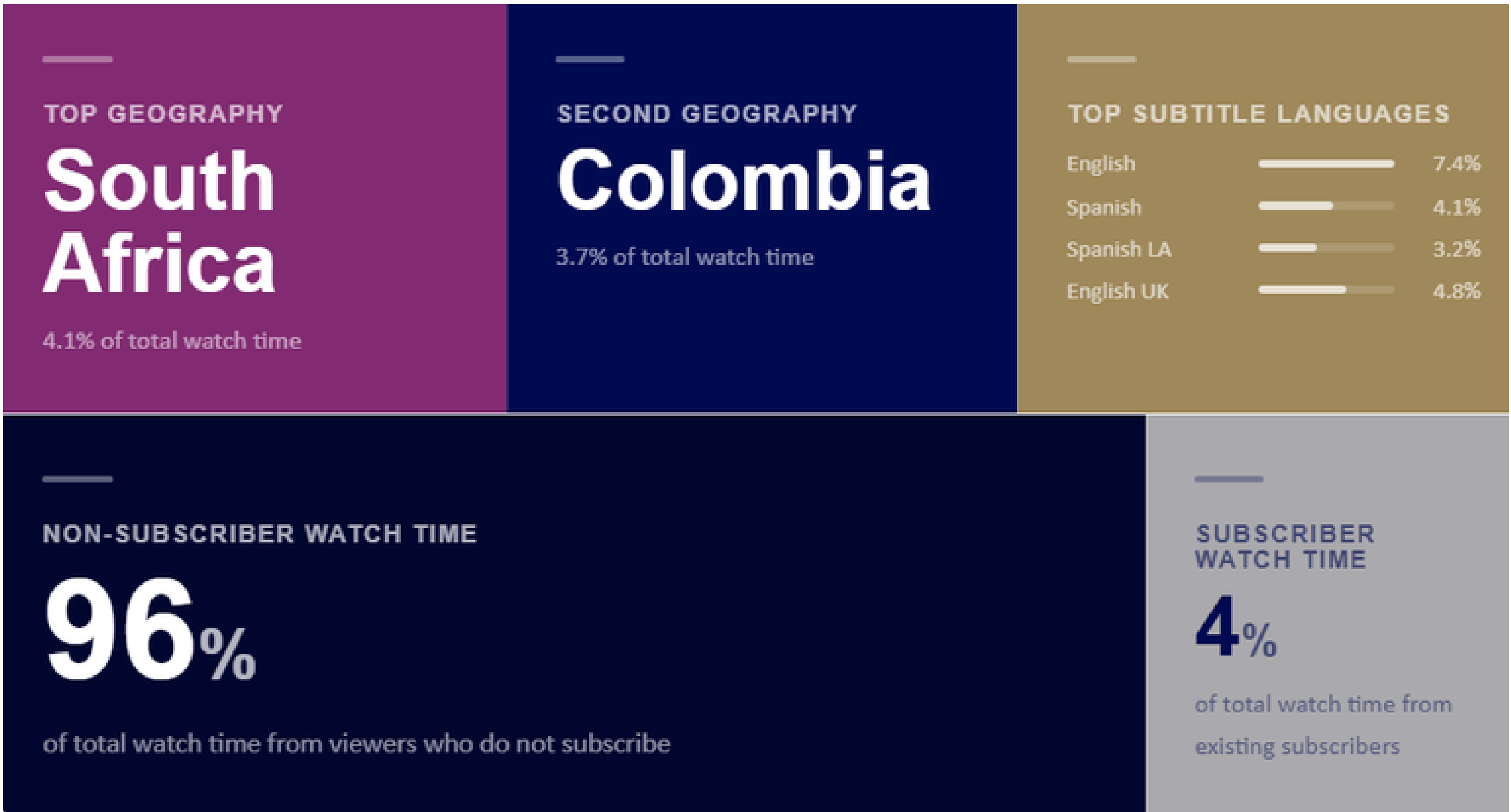
PUG COMMUNICATIONS

This section presents PUG's full digital communication performance for 2025 across all active channels. Data is sourced directly from platform analytics exports and screenshots, covering the period January 1 – December 31, 2025.



2025 was PUG's most active year across digital channels to date. Content was published consistently across LinkedIn, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, while the Brevo email programme ran 12 campaigns throughout the year. Across all platforms combined, PUG reached a cumulative digital audience of over 2,300 followers and subscribers, generated nearly 10,000 LinkedIn impressions, 9,200 Instagram views, and 537 YouTube views, and maintained email open rates more than three times the industry benchmark.

The standout content theme of the year was the Africa Hub Summer School 2025, which drove the strongest engagement spikes across LinkedIn, Instagram, and Facebook simultaneously in late September and October. A second performance peak occurred around the release of 'Intlekele / La Crisis' on YouTube in June. These two events demonstrate PUG's capacity to produce high-impact content when research activity and communications are aligned.



CONFERENCES

The American Association of Geographers (AAG) Conference, 24-28 March

The American Association of Geographers (AAG) hosted their annual conference in Detroit in late March 2025 and the PUG team presented at three panels. Christina Culwick Fatti presented a paper co-authored with Charlotte Lemanski and Fiona Anciano entitled 'Climate Apartheid? The Contradictory Impacts of Private Solar Investments for South Africa's Just Transition' in a session on Confronting Climate Apartheid (1): (Green) Energy and Infrastructure. Fiona Anciano presented the paper 'Hybridising governance for resilience in a time of crisis: learning from community-based organisations in Cape Town and Cali' in a session on Community Based Politics and Initiatives. Fiona chaired the panel discussion in a session titled, From Covid to Crisis: Mobilising Learnings About Responses in Unequal Cities.

PUG hosts special session on Just Urban transitions at ECAS in Prague, June 2025

At the 10th European Conference on African Studies in June 2025, the GoJUT project hosted a double session titled Just Urban Transitions: Governance and Citizenship in African Cities, facilitated by Fiona Anciano. The session critically examined who drives just transitions, for whom, and at what cost, with papers presented on private solar investments and informal representation in South African cities. Fiona Anciano and SJ Cooper-Knock also presented in a separate session on Decolonisation in South Africa.

International Geographic Union Conference, 11-15 Aug 2025

Christina Culwick Fatti was a speaker at the 2025 IGU Urban Commission's Annual Conference held in Stellenbosch, South Africa. In a session on "Urban Communities in Action", Dr Culwick Fatti unpacked her work on urban governance and the just transition in cities. Follow this link for more information.

Society for South African Geographers 2025 Student Conference, 3-5 Sept 2025

SSAG's 2025 student conference, hosted by UJ, brought together early-career researchers from around South Africa. PhD students from PUG's Governing the Just Urban Transitions project attended the conference and shared their ongoing research. Boitumelo Papane presented her paper on the 'Participatory Action Research for Infrastructural Development'. Kurisani Mdluli presented his work on water insecurity in Khayelitsha. Follow this link to learn more about their experience of the conference.

WORKSHOPS

ParliMeter Dashboard Workshop, 20 February 2025

On 20 February 2025, PUG and UWC's Democracy and Citizenship research niche area, in partnership with Organisation Undoing Tax Abuse (OUTA) and Parliamentary Monitoring Group (PMG), hosted the ParliMeter Dashboard workshop. The ParliMeter Dashboard officially launched 6 March 2025. This tool enhances accountability by offering real-time data on engagement, accessibility, and transparency. It supports inclusivity for marginalized groups and evaluates parliamentary effectiveness. Participants received hands-on training to use ParliMeter as an academic and research resource.



Left to right: Panel facilitator Monique Doyle, Nheo Fumba (PUG); Colleen Ryan; Babongile Bidla (PUG) and Robyn Pasensie (OUTA)

Cities and infectious disease crisis: COVID-19 lessons from four continents, Hybrid Workshop, 23 March 2025

Members of the Pandemics and Resilience Project headed to Detroit in March to reflect on the findings from four USF-funded projects that bridge research and practice, to address pandemic-driven urban issues in the Global North and South. Prof. Fiona Anciano presented insights from the Pandemics and Resilience Project in a presentation titled 'From social infrastructure to pandemic resilience?: Learning from and with low-income urban communities.'



Left to right: Carlos Andrés Tobar (Pontificia Universidad Javeriana Cali); Fiona Anciano (PUG); and Melanie Lombard (University of Sheffield)

Democracy Next Workshop, 28-29 October 2025

DemNext is an international research and action institute focused on scaling high-quality, empowered, and permanent citizens' assemblies. PUG, as a co-host of the 2026 Cape Town. Citizens' Assembly, was invited to attend the DemNex's convening in Banjul, The Gambia. The event gathered African and global practitioners in deliberative democracy to exchange insights on democratic innovation. Against a backdrop of declining global trust in democracy, participants emphasised Africa's rich traditions of dialogue, accountability, and inclusion, which can be strengthened through tools like sortition and citizens' assemblies.

URBAN MATTERS SEMINAR SERIES



Challenges of University–City Relationships: Reflections from South Africa, 7 August 2025

This seminar explored the evolving and often fraught physical, institutional, and human connections between the University of the Witwatersrand and City of Johannesburg, focusing on efforts to bridge historically separated university space and urban environments. It reflected on the complex challenges faced by those aiming to foster meaningful university–city engagement, highlighting the need for diverse actor networks and locally grounded

strategies to reshape South African urban development. Alan Mabin is an Emeritus Professor in the School of Architecture and Planning at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, and an Associate Member of the “Cities are Back in Town” research group at Sciences Po, Paris.

Given the track record of private consultants, it is concerning that they are cornering the market for advice on the climate crisis and a just transition. The climate crisis and how we address it is one of the most urgent and defining issues of our time. South Africa is the first Global South country to conclude a formal Just Energy Transition Partnership agreement with international donors, yet the country’s response is increasingly being shaped by management consultants who see this as a new frontier for profit taking.

There is the need for an urgent public debate about how we hold these unelected private technocrats to account. We must critically assess their impact on South Africa’s pursuit of an energy transition that is just and benefits the most vulnerable and immediately affected members of society.

The Climate Con? How Management Consultants Are Cashing in on the Climate Crisis, 19 August 2025

In June 2025, Open Secrets released an investigative report – [The Climate Consultants](#) – that uncovered how large private managements consultancies are playing an increasingly central role in steering South Africa’s climate response—with little transparency or accountability. These consultants are often linked to donor countries, and have so far received 65% of all committed grants funds meant for South Africa’s Just Energy Transition (JET). Less than 25% has gone to NGOs, Universities, and other public sector entities.



This seminar was presented by Michael Marchant and Zen Mathe from Open Secrets

RESEARCH OUTPUTS

JOURNAL ARTICLES

Africa, C., Assmo, P ., Moses, M., & Cornelius, M. (2025). Embracing work-integrated learning in political studies. *Studies in Continuing Education*. doi:10.1080/0158037X.2025.2463355

Anciano, F. and Lombard, M. (2025) Hybridising governance for resilience in a time of crisis: learning from community-based organisation in Cape Town and Cali. *International Development Planning Review*. 47(1). pp 41-63 doi:10.3828/idpr.2024.15

Anciano, F., Lemanski, C., Culwick Fatti, C., Rubin, M., 2025. Substituting for the State: The Sovereignty Impacts of Diverse Citizens’ Off-grid Infrastructure Strategies in South Africa. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.70001>

McPhearson, et al., 2025. Global synthesis and regional insights for mainstreaming urban nature-based solutions. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 122, e2315910121. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2315910121>

Mdee, A., Ofori, A. D., Barrington, D., Anciano, F., Dube, M., Hutchings, P ., ... & Ward, C. (2025). On a journey to citywide inclusive sanitation (CWIS)? A political economy analysis of container-based sanitation (CBS) in the fragmented (in) formal city. *Globalizations*, 22(5). pp 875-895.

Exton, B., Casas, A., Lewis, A., Willcock, S., Kupiec-Teahan, B., Barrington, D.J., Anciano, F., Hutchings, P ., Bell, A.R., Dube, M., et al. (2025) ‘Assessing the role of servicing in enhancing sanitation-related quality of life among container-based sanitation users’ *Nature Water*, 3, 1163–1173.

Lewis, A.R., Willcock, S., Casas, A., Kupiec-Teahan, B., Mendoza Sanchez, J., Anciano, F., Barrington, D.J., Dube, M., Hutchings, P ., Karani, C., Llaxacondor, A., López, H., Mdee, A.L., Nou, K., Ofori, A.D., Riungu, J.N., Russel, K.C., Haque Tamal, M.E., Parker, A.H., Bell, A.R., 2025. Realities of using self-administered smartphone surveys to solve sustainability challenges. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 12, 1134.

NEWSLETTERS

PUG produced three newsletters last year, featuring key updates on events, new projects, team highlights, and insights into our ongoing research and collaborations.

- PUG Newsletter | Issue 1, 2025 | 17 April 2025.
- PUG Newsletter | Issue 2, 2025 | 8 August 2025.
- PUG Insights | Issue 3, 2025 | 1 December 2025.

RESEARCH OUTPUTS

BLOGS

PUG produces a wide range of publications and outputs, including blog posts.

Boitumelo Papane. 5 March 2025. Why Should I Care? Public Participation in South Africa's Democracy? Available at: <https://www.pugresearch.org.za/blogs/why-should-i-care-public-participation-in-south-africas-democracy/>

Dr. Meshay Moses, Nheo Fumba and Babongile Bidla. 30 May 2025. Can Technology Tackle Democracy's Shortcomings? The Promises of ParliMeter - A New Digital Tool to Strengthen Parliamentary Accountability. Available at: <https://www.pugresearch.org.za/blogs/can-technology-tackle-democracys-shortcomings-the-promises-of-parlimeter-a-new-digital-tool-to-strengthen-parliamentary-accountability/>

Christina Culwick Fatti. 11 June 2025. Climate Apartheid? How South Africa's Booming Private Solar Investments Reflect and Reproduce Structural Injustices. Available at: <https://www.pugresearch.org.za/blogs/climate-apartheid-how-south-africas-booming-private-solar-investments-reflect-and-reproduce-structural-injustices/>

Mmeli Dube. 13 June 2025. Living the Legacy of June 16 - UWC as a Space of Sanctuary for Young African Human Rights Defenders. Available at: <https://www.pugresearch.org.za/blogs/living-the-legacy-of-june-16-uwc-as-a-space-of-sanctuary-for-young-african-human-rights-defenders/>

Melanie Lombard, Fiona Anciano, Charlotte Lemanski and Carlos Tobar. 29 July 2025. Urban Crisis in South African and Colombian Cities: Understanding Experiences, Improving Responses. Available at: <https://www.pugresearch.org.za/blogs/urban-crisis-in-south-african-and-colombian-cities-understanding-experiences-improving-responses/>

Fiona Anciano Charlotte Lemanski, Christina Culwick Fatti and Margot Rubin. 6 October 2025. South Africans are Going Off the Service Grid: What Happens when Citizens Replace the State? Available at: <https://www.pugresearch.org.za/blogs/south-africans-are-going-off-the-service-grid-what-happens-when-citizens-replace-the-state/>

Omphemetse Morale. 10 November 2025. The Balance Act: My Journey as a Masters Student and PUG Intern. Available at: <https://www.pugresearch.org.za/blogs/the-balance-act-my-journey-as-a-masters-student-and-pug-intern/>

Lindelwa Mayinga. 10 November 2025. Managing Menstruation with Dignity: Beyond Sanitation in Informal Settlements. Available at: <https://www.pugresearch.org.za/blogs/managing-menstruation-with-dignity-beyond-sanitation-in-informal-settlements/>

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