News
New book on planetary well-being of relevance to air quality published by UJ Press

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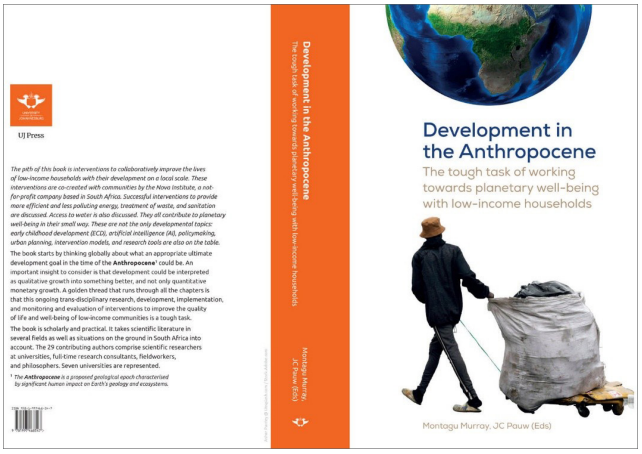

In December 2025, *Development in the Anthropocene: The tough task of working towards planetary well-being with low-income households* became available electronically on the UJ Press platform. It is now in print. Although the book has a South African setting, the peer-reviewed scholarly chapters carry insights that are applicable to other jurisdictions. The point of the relevant chapters is clean air for low-income households.

Book launch

The book was launched by UJ Press and the Nova Institute on 15 April 2026 at the University of Pretoria. It was well-attended – a typical academic occasion with short presentations and open discussions with Jade Jacobsohn as discussion facilitator. The force behind the book, Montagu Murray, director of Nova, set out the reasons why the book was composed and the aims it seeks to achieve. (Nova Institute, a South African not-for-profit company, works with low-income families to improve their quality of life.) The subtitle encapsulates the moral duty of this development agency: *The tough task of working towards planetary well-being with low-income households*. An important aspect of this is the formulation in the first chapter of planetary well-being goals. Improving the quality of life implies measuring it in your interventions if you want to be honest. Valery Møller, doyenne of quality-of-life studies in South Africa, enthusiastically related how her collaboration on the book linked to broader work on quality of life in South Africa. Tshediso Pudumo, also connected to Nova, linked his presentation to Montagu Murray's introduction by analysing things that academics should keep in mind when planning research with low-income families. Kristy Langerman, with her background in both industry and academia, posed the question of whether industries, NPOs and universities approach development differently. Finally, two philosophers had a word. Sytse Strijbos from the Netherlands, who played a big role in South Africa promoting an ethical approach to development, underlined the task of development from a Christian perspective. Koos Pauw, co-editor, asked the question of what further philosophical work is required now that the book is published. He suggested that since the promotion of clean air is a public function, the role of the state should not be underestimated. He further asked whether planetary well-being is a necessary goal for making things better.

Overview of the book

The Anthropocene is proposed as the name for the current geological epoch characterised by significant human impact on the earth's geology and ecosystems. A healthy ecosystem cannot be separate from clean air, locally and globally. Many of Nova's projects relate to the air that low-income families breathe. The experience that they have gathered over the years is evidenced in much of this book. It does not deal primarily with clean air. The scope is much wider. Philosophy, waste, town-planning, sanitation, and the measurement of quality of life, among others, are discussed in a scholarly way.

In this item, we focus on clean air, though. Five of the sixteen chapters are important in this context. One main point is that the air breathed inside a dwelling can be as impactful as the air "outside". It is also *ambient*, especially in low-income environments. Government policy and structures do not always take this into account.

The third chapter, with Christiaan Pauw as the main author, deals with an approach to identifying reasonable health-oriented air quality interventions in a data-constrained context. Its focus is on how to think about implementing evidence-based air quality interventions to improve health in low-income households with due regard to non-industrial local sources of pollution. It is a complex issue. To make progress with improving health through air quality interventions, they signal (i) considerations regarding the selection of pollutants to target, (ii) considerations regarding exposure reduction, (iii) proceeding with sufficiently

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positive interventions where sufficient knowledge is available, (iv) an evidence-based method for intervention development and selection in particular communities or subgroups of households, (v) an appropriate approach to air quality impact evaluation in dynamic environments, (vi) actively avoiding zero-impact interventions, (vii) targeted research regarding specific topics, (viii) respecting the intended beneficiary, (ix) considering the impact of green policies that potentially increase pollutant exposure suffered by members of low-income households by increasing energy cost, and (x) clarifying ambient air.

In Chapter 4, Kristy Langerman and her co-authors discuss and explain case studies of Nova projects introducing sustainable energy interventions in low-income households in the context of cleaner air. "Clean energy solutions" implies reduced air pollution solutions and a transition in households away from obsolete heating methods with dirty fuels such as wood and coal. The outcomes of these interventions are thoroughly evaluated. A main message of this chapter is that clean energy solutions are intertwined with both household adoption and intervention management. A solution might be technically superior, but when it is not sustainable in terms of household use in a community, it is not optimal. This idea resonates with Chapter 9 entitled "From consultation to collaboration: a comparative analysis of public participation in low-income communities", with Niké Wesch as the lead author. They compare consultation and collaboration as two ways of interaction with communities for which clean-burning heat-producing interventions were intended. In one instance, a clean-burning stove was developed by engineers for the community; in the other instance, the community co-produced the Basa Magogo solution, which was more sustainable due to community acceptance.

In Chapter 4, Langerman et al. further found that sustainable energy use can be approached by considering the trade-offs that need to be made between energy security, affordability, and environmental sustainability. However, projects designed using these approaches, such as clean cookstove roll-outs, have typically achieved poor rates of adoption and sustained use. They argue that sustainable household energy interventions are those based on user requirements, designed to meet energy service needs and impact favourably on a household's ability to meet its fundamental needs. Household energy interventions in eight communities in the North West and Limpopo provinces were assessed, amongst others, by comparing the use of various heat sources inside dwellings from an energy perspective in the context of clean air and other functionalities. They found that essential elements informing the design of successful interventions are increasing the scale of implementation as knowledge and control increase through a rational project life cycle, a comprehensive understanding of household fuel stacking practices to provide energy applications, and an assessment of the impacts of interventions on the overall quality of life.

Valerie Møller and Montagu Murray wrote Chapter 12 discussing case studies in the quality-of-life assessment of cleaner energy interventions through "narratives of impact". As mentioned with regard to previous chapters above, air quality programmes to reduce air pollution from local sources of emissions in low-income contexts are on the agenda in the book. These sources include the burning of domestic fuels such as coal, wood, and paraffin, as well as the burning of domestic waste and vehicle-entrained road dust. Households use domestic fuels that cause harmful emissions: either as primary energy carriers or as stacking fuels for utilities such as cooking, space heating, and heating water for bathing and cleaning. When alternative cleaner energy options are introduced to households, it is crucial that these alternatives improve the quality of life of end users and do not introduce unforeseen negative side effects. Nova investigates the feasibility of interventions or intervention combinations before proceeding to larger-scale implementation. This chapter scrutinises the process and results followed in feasibility assessments of interventions aimed at replacing or reducing wood use, the burning of domestic waste, and the use of paraffin. The feasibility assessments are done with a novel tool that Nova developed, the *Particular impact on quality-of-life assessment* (Piqola) tool. The chapter introduces the Piqola tool and provides case studies to show how it is used in practice. Specific focus is placed on the role of "narratives of impact", that is, the information gained from verbatim feedback from participating end users describing how interventions impacted their quality of life. The Piqola tool results are contextualised and evaluated with reference to the broader field of quality-of-life studies.

The promotion and the protection of clean air take place in a policy framework laid down by the state. In South Africa, this encapsulates the Constitution, Acts, regulations, official procedures, norms and standards, and strategies. The articulation of environmental and water policy since democracy in South Africa is discussed in Chapter 10 under the broad umbrella of Section 24 of the Constitution. Phato Mukwevho wrote the air quality part of the chapter. The question was whether, or to what extent, such policy in South Africa was influenced by scientific evidence. A full description of the various air quality instruments is provided. The role of scientific evidence increased gradually, and information was imported from other settings. In many cases, the baseline assessment and modelling of air quality are thoroughly informed by science.

References

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