

‘Things have changed since we last spoke...’: the impacts of parental death on the life and livelihood of a young informal vendor in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

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ARTICLE

‘Things have changed since we last spoke...’: The impacts of parental death on the life and livelihood of a young informal vendor in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

Nathan Salvidge 

Department of Geography and
Environmental Science, University of
Reading, Reading, UK

Correspondence

Nathan Salvidge, Department of
Geography and Environmental Science,
University of Reading, Whiteknights,
PO Box 227, Reading RG6 6AB, UK.
Email: nathan.salvidge@reading.ac.uk

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Abstract

While an increasing number of studies concerning youth and informality have examined the complex relationship between youth, informal work and transitions to adulthood, this literature has paid little attention to how the death of a family member presents distinctive challenges to young vendors' life and livelihood progression. Addressing this, the paper draws on a case study of a small-scale informal worker in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, who was participating in in-depth ethnographic research when their father died suddenly. Through this, it investigates how parental death intersects with the challenges a young vendor experienced working informally while simultaneously attempting to achieve transitions to anticipated adulthood. Life-mapping interviews and participatory timeline diagrams were employed, gaining rich insights into a young vendor's experiences of parental death, revealing how these were shaped by an interplay between the past, present and future. More specifically, the research, which brings together literature concerning youth, informality and family relations, explores how parental death can (re)configure a young person's household roles, responsibilities and relations in response to sudden precarity in the present, reshaping priorities and plans towards achieving goals over different timeframes. Given persistent levels of informality and uncertainty across employment in sub-Saharan Africa and beyond, this article provides a timely contribution by highlighting the need for more studies to investigate how parental death creates and exacerbates the challenges youth vendors experience, constraining their abilities to grow and sustain their lives and livelihoods within the informal sector.

KEYWORDS

informality, livelihoods, parental death, Tanzania, transitions, youth

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1 | INTRODUCTION

The number of studies examining the lives and livelihoods of young people working within the informal sector across sub-Saharan African contexts has increased in recent years. Research has drawn attention to young vendors' day-to-day practices and strategies (Salvidge, 2022), their experiences of and abilities to manage various challenges in contexts characterised by increasing levels of informality and precarity (Thieme, 2018; van Blerk et al., 2024), and to the inter-relationship between youths' informal livelihoods and heterogenous transitions to adulthood (Afutu-Kotey et al., 2017; Langevang, 2008). In the context of persistently high levels of informality throughout sub-Saharan African, where 79.2% of employment takes place within the informal sector (ILO, 2018, p. 28), continuing and expanding research into the evolving relationship between youth and informality remains essential. Among other issues, it has been identified that further exploration is needed into the diverse challenges and precarity confronting young people pursuing livelihoods within the informal sector (Gough & Langevang, 2016).

To date, research concerning youth and informality has paid little attention to how life-changing events such as parental death impact and present distinctive challenges to young people trying to develop their lives and livelihoods within the informal sector. Addressing this, I draw on geographical literature concerning youth and family relations, which has made significant contributions to understanding how parental death (re)shapes youths' everyday practices and experiences as well as their complex transitions to adulthood (Evans, 2014; McQuaid et al., 2019), to examine how parental death intersects with the existing and evolving challenges a young vendor working informally experienced while simultaneously attempting to pursue anticipated adulthood.

This paper draws on a case study of a small-scale informal vendor in Tanzania participating in in-depth ethnographic research when their father died suddenly. It provides much needed insights into how death plays a significant role in (re) shaping the livelihood and lifecourse trajectory of a young person working within the informal sector, contributing to wider debates concerning geographies of youth, employment and precarity. The paper begins by examining youths' informal livelihoods and transitions to adulthood, and how parental loss can (re)shape their everyday practices and lifecourse trajectories. Then, it outlines the benefits of using methods such as life-mapping interviews and participatory timeline diagrams to develop rounded insights into a young person's lived experiences of parental death. The remainder of the paper presents a detailed account of a vendor's experiences of parental death and how these are shaped by an interplay between the past, present and future. While the findings of this case study are not generalisable given the situated context of the individual vendor, they accentuate the need for more research to investigate the intricate and manifold impacts of parental death on young informal vendors' livelihood development and complex transitions to expected adulthood.

2 | YOUTH TRANSITIONS, INFORMAL LIVELIHOODS AND THE IMPACTS OF PARENTAL DEATH

Young people's transitions to adulthood have gained notable interest over recent decades, and in the context of persistent and increasing levels of precarity worldwide, this area of research remains critical. Research based in sub-Saharan African contexts has recognised that youths' heterogenous transitions to adulthood, traditionally associated with completing education, finding gainful employment, getting married and starting a family (Day, 2021), are relational and shaped by intersecting factors, including age, class, gender, race and place (Honwana, 2012). However, economic uncertainty and high rates of un/underemployment across the region (Thieme, 2018) have become significant factors impeding young people's abilities to accumulate the social and economic resources necessary to achieve desired forms of adulthood (Day & Evans, 2015). Youth transitions to adulthood across sub-Saharan African contexts are increasingly becoming delayed, reversed, reinvented, and sometimes, never realised (Honwana, 2012; van Blerk, 2008). The intricacy and non-linearity of young people's situated lives has led to increased recognition that youth transitions occur across the lifecourse rather than at predefined or distinct phases (Langevang, 2008). Recent engagements with the temporality of transitions have contributed further to understanding the complexity of these processes, highlighting how young people's pasts interact with the present, shaping the complex interplay between the present and future (Bailey, 2009; Hanson, 2017). Studies in sub-Saharan African contexts have identified temporality as multi-directional, recognising that youth transitions are not just about moving forward and considering the future, but also involve prioritising needs and responding to changing circumstances and significant events in the present (Ansell et al., 2014; van Blerk et al., 2024).

Livelihoods are an important aspect of youths' complex and relational transitions to adulthood. Focusing on temporality in young people's livelihoods, research has identified that livelihood actions and decisions are shaped by an interplay

between the present and future and based on youths' own needs as well as the needs and expectations of others (Ansell et al., 2014). Because of this, the complex and diverse relationship between young people's livelihoods and transitions to adulthood requires examination in relation to the contexts in which they are situated (Afutu-Kotey et al., 2017). In response to limited employment opportunities within the formal economy, growing numbers of youth across sub-Saharan Africa have created job opportunities by engaging in entrepreneurial activities, much of which is taking place within the informal sector (Cieslik et al., 2022). An estimated 96% of youth undertake informal work in this region (ILO, 2018). It is acknowledged that informal work can present youth opportunities to achieve transitions to imagined adulthood through gaining economic independence, developing skills, establishing social networks, supporting family members, and establishing a household (Afutu-Kotey et al., 2017) in environments with limited alternatives (van Blerk, 2008). Yet, the challenges of informal work, such as income instability and unsuitable vending spaces, can significantly constrain youths' abilities to plan for the future and achieve anticipated forms of adulthood (Assaad & Krafft, 2021; Langevang et al., 2012).

Although research examining youth and informality has made notable contributions to understanding young vendors' complex circumstances, the impacts of parental death on youths' informal livelihoods and transitions to expected adulthood have remained largely absent from these discussions. Other literature on youth and family relations has extensively investigated the effects of parental death on young people's everyday lives and lifecourse transitions. Understanding parental death as a 'significant event' that has varying consequences over different timeframes (Evans, 2014), this work has examined the multifaceted emotional, financial, material and social impacts of parental death on young people's lives and how they adapt and respond to these circumstances based on experiences in the past and present, as well as their considerations of the future (Bowlby et al., 2022; Evans, 2011). Following the death of a parent, research has observed that youths' everyday household responsibilities and relations alter in ways necessary for survival and well-being in the present and future (Bowlby et al., 2022). These responsibilities and relations, widely understood as interconnected and interdependent, involve providing and receiving emotional, financial, material and social support (Abebe, 2012) in response to the loss (through death) of influential relationships within a household. Young people often experience increases to their household responsibilities, such as 'household chores' (e.g., fetching water), 'child care' (e.g., supervising siblings), 'household management' (e.g., future planning) and 'income-generating activities' (e.g., street vending) (Evans, 2010). Obligations to support household members and maintain household financial security following the loss of a key household member (Bowlby et al., 2022) influence youths' everyday actions and decisions, shaping and shaped by expectations and goals for the future (Ansell et al., 2011; Day, 2021).

Factors such as gender and birth order commonly influence young people's everyday roles and family relations following the death of a parent in sub-Saharan African contexts (McQuaid et al., 2019). While the impacts youth experience following parental death will vary between individuals, many will nonetheless encounter delays or restrictions in their transitions to adulthood (Evans, 2011). This paper, which brings together literature on youth, informality and family relations, makes a notable academic contribution by examining the complex and diverse ways parental death interacts with a young person's life and livelihood development, shaping their intricate pathway to anticipated adulthood.

3 | RESEARCH APPROACHES

This article presents findings from a case study of one participant, Collins (pseudonym), aged 23, whose father died unexpectedly while he was participating in ethnographic research conducted between August 2018 and August 2019 in Arusha and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. The study sought to gain insights into the complex, diverse and interconnected lives and livelihoods of young vendors undertaking small-scale informal businesses. Collins, a beneficiary at a youth-led community organisation I visited several times across different research projects, was one of 22 participants from a purposive sample of 37 young people aged 15–35 years involved in in-depth ethnographic research.

Participant observation was the first method I employed with all participants to contextualise their work practices and develop rapport. This involved engaging in dialogue with youth participants over prolonged periods during their working day. Observations typically lasted between 6 and 12 hours each. Semi-structured life-mapping interviews were also used to understand how young vendors' lifecourse and informal livelihoods developed over time-space (Bailey, 2009). In total, 31 interviews were conducted, including nine follow-up interviews. They gained detailed insights into vendors' heterogeneous experiences, highlighting the complex interplay between the present and future, shaped by memories and past experiences (Ansell et al., 2014). Participatory timeline diagrams were created by participants at the end of life-mapping interviews. Timeline diagrams increased the level of detail about 'significant events' that (re)shaped participants' lives and livelihoods (Worth, 2009). During follow-up interviews, participants could add to their diagrams.

Research assistants were employed when undertaking research with youth participants, all of whom spoke Kiswahili. They translated between English and Kiswahili during interviews, participatory diagram sessions and participant observations. Assistants also transcribed all interview recordings and translated these and timeline diagrams into English.

I first interviewed Collins in November 2018 after undertaking a participant observation with him in October 2018. In January 2019, Collins and I scheduled a follow-up interview for March 2019 following a change to his work situation. However, we postponed this until June 2019 following the sudden death of his father in February 2019. Based on findings from life-mapping interviews and a participatory timeline diagram, the article centres around Collins' reflections on the initial impacts of his father's death on his household roles, responsibilities and relations, livelihood development, and transitions to expected adulthood. In acknowledgment of the sensitivity of using data from just one participant concerning their anonymity, comprehensive measures have been taken, including omitting personally identifiable information, using a pseudonym, and carefully selecting the contextual evidence provided.

4 | THE IMPACTS OF PARENTAL DEATH ON A YOUNG VENDOR'S HOUSEHOLD ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES AND RELATIONS

During a participant observation with Collins in October 2018, he was running a small-scale charcoal-selling business and had done so for eight months. However, during an interview in November (2018), he said he stopped this enterprise because of diminishing capital and increasing debt to charcoal suppliers. Instead, he started working informally for a road construction company in Dar es Salaam, earning 10,000 Tanzanian Shillings (Tsh) (£3.08) daily. Collins mentioned the physically demanding nature of this work compared with his previous charcoal business, but emphasised it enabled him to continue saving money to pursue further study and start a farming business, something he planned to achieve within five years. The informal work he had undertaken in the past and was undertaking in the present, although challenging and insecure, was helping him work towards pursuing further education and establishing a successful business, which Collins identified as transitions that would enable him to pursue anticipated adulthood. Here, the interplay between Collins' past, present and future first becomes evident. As the paper progresses, the relationship between the past, present and future, and the degree to which these temporal orders feature in Collins' accounts, alters depending on the issue(s) of focus.

At the time of the first interview, Collins lived with his mother, father, grandfather, two younger brothers and sister. When asked whether he contributed to the household, he said, 'There is no special amount, but if I get 20,000 Tanzanian Shillings (Tsh) [£6.16] I can contribute it by taking care of electricity bills and groceries'. Collins' income was unpredictable, and his parents recognised he was working hard towards pursuing further education and establishing his own business. Consequently, he was not expected to regularly contribute financially to the household, but he was responsible for undertaking everyday household tasks, such as fetching water and washing the dishes. However, his circumstances suddenly changed. In February 2019, I received a text from Collins informing me his father had died unexpectedly. A few weeks later, at the youth-led community organisation Collins attended, he mentioned facing mounting pressures following his father's death.

4.1 | Changes to household roles and responsibilities

During a follow-up interview with Collins in June 2019, I began by asking what impact(s) his father's death had on him and his family. He explained, 'Apart from relying on him [father] for home expenses, he was also an advisor. His absence means responsibilities have increased on me'. Collins' current situation was impacted by his father's 'absence', placing him in a position of greater authority within the household, with increased responsibilities:

Now, I have many [more] responsibilities than before ... I am the big brother of the house so all responsibilities relating to household safety, siblings' school progress and home groceries are currently on me.

Collins' use of the word 'now' highlights a notable difference in his responsibilities when comparing the present with the past, caused by his father's death and the resulting loss of a significant relationship within the household (see Ansell et al., 2011). During his first interview, before his father died, he was focused on securing regular income to pursue transitions to anticipated adulthood, including further education and starting his own business. Now, he was concerned with ensuring he could consistently support the multiple needs of family members within the household, showing how his prioritisation

of responsibilities was (re)shaped in response to parental death and the sudden precarity he and his family were experiencing (discussed further in Section 5). Regarding this, he said, 'I am an older brother here, so whenever I get something [i.e., money], I must share it with my family'. By June 2019, Collins had again changed his work, selling shopping bags at a local market. He remarked that this work was unpredictable, often generating little income. Nevertheless, like his father, whom he said contributed to 'home expenses', Collins was expected to support his family financially. This is connected to historical notions of men as household heads across many African contexts (Langevang, 2008). He also linked his new responsibilities to his status as 'big' brother within the household, indicating how family relations play a significant role in reshaping household duties (discussed further in Section 4.2). Birth order has been identified as a crucial factor influencing expectations concerning who undertakes what roles and responsibilities within a household following the death of a parent in sub-Saharan African contexts (Evans, 2011; McQuaid et al., 2019). Collins identified it was because of this that his family depended on him to support their needs, showing how socio-cultural pressures shaped his contemporary experiences.

4.2 | Changes to family relations

Because of his status within the household, Collins' relationships with other family members altered when his father died. As mentioned, supporting his siblings was identified by Collins as a substantial responsibility he took on following his father's death. He identified paying for his siblings' school fees, uniform, stationery and transport costs. Yet, Collins' relationship with his siblings was not confined to supporting them through financial means. He also attempted to take on the role of 'adviser', but acknowledged that this is something he struggled with. Reflecting on how his father used to fulfil this responsibility, he exclaimed, 'There is a way which he [my father] used to treat my siblings so that they can do well with school, but now I can't do that for them'. Collins' memories of the past caused him to feel as though he could not adequately fulfil this role in the way his father once did. This brings attention to the ways Collins' emotions were entangled with both the past and the present, shaping, in part, his experiences of uncertainty in the present linked to self-doubt around his ability to emotionally and financially support his younger siblings. Comprehending these complex and changing family dynamics over time helps understand how uncertainty in young people's lives is shaped and reshaped (McQuaid et al., 2019).

Although the reconfiguration of household relations presented some challenges to Collins, it was also through these changes that his family's needs were managed and met. Collins identified that working in partnership with his mother enabled the fulfilment of all household responsibilities:

There are things which I can do on my own like supervising my siblings' homework and small [financial] contributions to the house, but still, I can't do everything. So, if there is something which needs to be done, me and my mother contribute [financially] so that we can support each other.

The support Collins and his mother provided to the family involved pooling resources, something Collins said he and his mother had not done together before his father's death. Talking more about the supportive relationship he had with his mother, Collins explained, 'I cannot imagine how I will live without her. I think life would become too much for me, I need her'. Collins was not receiving any support from anyone outside the household, meaning he heavily relied on his mother for emotional and financial support in response to the challenges and feelings of vulnerability he experienced following his father's death. Evans' (2011) research in Tanzania and Uganda has also highlighted how youth often rely on 'informal' networks of support, including family relations, to manage situations of uncertainty.

Understanding changes in household relations between youth and other household members in response to parental death is crucial (Abebe, 2012) and has helped, in part, to appreciate how Collins experienced and negotiated changes to his roles and responsibilities following his father's death. The following section explores the extent to which the above-mentioned changes in response to parental death (re)configured Collins' priorities and plans towards achieving goals over different timeframes.

5 | THE IMPACTS OF PARENTAL DEATH OVER DIFFERENT TIMEFRAMES

The death of Collins' father reconfigured his priorities and plans over 'temporary' and longer timeframes, shaped by an interplay between the present and future (Ansell et al., 2014). Figure 1 shows an extract from Collins' life-mapping diagram

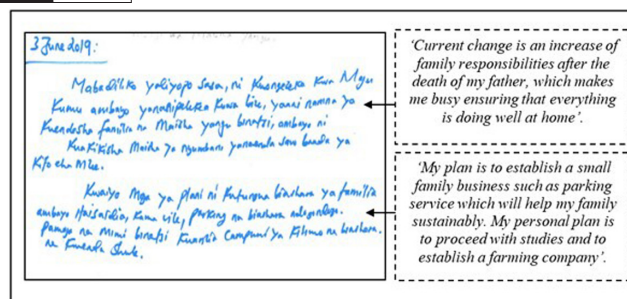


FIGURE 1 An extract from Collins' updated participatory timeline diagram (June 2019).

(created in November 2018), added to during his follow-up interview conducted in June 2019. The second paragraph, which mentions a ‘parking service’, refers to a secure pay-per-use *boda boda* (motorcycle taxi) shelter Collins planned to build outside his family home. This strategy focused on contributing to the household’s livelihood (Bowlby et al., 2022) and considered how the land outside the family home was a resource that could generate income. Additionally, but not included on the diagram, he also wanted to use the space to build a stall for his mother to sell fruit and vegetables, enabling her to continue helping Collins support the household. Collins’ plans for and considerations of the future over a ‘temporary’ timeframe were (re)shaped by his relationships with others and his consideration of how specific relations could enhance the support provided to the household following his father’s death. Connected to these plans, Collins said, ‘these short plans are for the family’s well-being’. These plans were formulated in response to his father’s death which required Collins to almost immediately think of ways he could solve household-related issues and provide consistent support to his family, as his father would have done. Collins’ emphasis on ‘short plans’ indicates that he envisaged that the support he planned to provide in response to his father’s death and the sudden precarity he and his family were experiencing was ‘provisional’; a period of change and disruption he envisioned would be ‘temporary’ (Evans, 2014).

Collins made clear distinctions between his consideration of different periods in the future, also bringing focus to his plans over longer timeframes. These concerned pursuing further education and developing a farming business (see Figure 1), consistent with the transitions to expected adulthood he identified pursuing before his father's death (see Section 4). His consideration of plans over 'temporary' and longer timeframes were often presented as 'separate' from one another, and in relation to the latter, he said, 'my long term plans are directly related to me'. While it has been observed that young people will pursue their 'own' goals and aspirations while taking on increased familial responsibilities in response to parental death (Day & Evans, 2015), Collins' account suggests that although his expected life and livelihood plans over 'temporary' and longer timeframes focused on familial support and personal development, respectively, these are not independent from one another. Upon asking Collins more about his business plan, he explained,

My [farming] business will be well known ... I will be a person who will be able to do anything in our family.
I will be able to cover my siblings' needs and solve other minor family problems

Collins' plans to support his family were not confined solely to his 'temporary' plans and strategies. His visions over a longer timeframe concerning livelihood development and achieving economic independence, connected to his transitions to expected adulthood, also considered how he could position himself better to support his family's multiple needs. Other research also highlights how young people's life and livelihood actions, decisions and goals are formed in relation to the needs and expectations of others (Ansell et al., 2014; Day, 2021).

Because of significant changes to his responsibilities in the present, requiring him to focus predominately on plans to support his family over a 'temporary' period in response to sudden precarity, Collins was unsure whether he would realise his plans over longer timeframes. The unpredictability of his current work, selling bags at a local market, exacerbated this uncertainty. Uncertainty is a common experience among young informal vendors (Thieme, 2018), making it hard for youth to predict their futures over longer timeframes (Langevang et al., 2012). Collins recognised that his father's death, combined with the inconsistent income he generated from working informally, could present delays to his expected transitions to adulthood. Since his father's death, Collins was using the little and unpredictable income he earned to pay for household expenses rather than saving towards pursuing further education and developing his own business. He was focused on supporting his family and thinking of ways to improve the household's financial security, ultimately reducing the time and effort he could spend working towards plans over longer

timeframes. This heightened feelings of uncertainty around whether he would or could achieve anticipated forms of adulthood.

6 | CONCLUSIONS

Drawing on a case study of one informal vendor, Collins, whose father died suddenly while participating in ethnographic research, the paper addresses a gap in the current literature on youth and informality. It makes notable empirical contributions by examining the multifaceted impacts of parental death on a young vendor's life and livelihood actions, practices, experiences and plans, shaped by an interplay between the past, present and future. It shows how parental death, which presented distinctive challenges through the loss of a significant family member, (re)configured Collins' household roles, responsibilities and relations, interacting with and exacerbating the unpredictability and instability of the informal work he undertook. His father's death, which caused a period of change and disruption (Evans, 2014), brought about uncertainty concerning his temporary and longer timeframe plans. The little income Collins generated through his informal work created immediate uncertainty in the present around how he would fulfil obligations and expectations (Bowlby et al., 2022) to address and sustain the needs of his family, who experienced sudden precarity following his father's death. This reshaped his plans and priorities over different timeframes, redirecting his attention away from working towards achieving transitions to anticipated adulthood, including pursuing further education and establishing a business, which he was working towards before his father died.

The findings from the case study accentuate the need for more research to explore the complex and diverse impacts of parental death on young informal vendors' everyday practices, relations and lifecourse trajectories across sub-Saharan Africa and the extent to which these events contribute to the delay, restriction and reintervention of youths' transitions to anticipated adulthood. This will enable more rounded insights into the complex, diverse and evolving challenges young vendors across sub-Saharan Africa experience and negotiate in attempts to sustain and advance their lives and livelihoods in the informal sector (Gough & Langevang, 2016). The paper also illustrates that exploration into how young people respond to and manage the death of a parent in contexts including Tanzania, where formal systems of support for young people dealing with the loss of close family members are limited, is also required.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

ORCID

Nathan Salvidge  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9716-5156>

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