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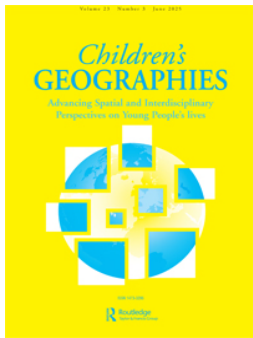
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Nathan Salvidge

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# Histories of future-makers: examining young informal vendors' current and imagined lives and livelihoods in urban Tanzania

Nathan Salvidge ⓘD

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

**ABSTRACT**

Although the opportunities and challenges of the informal sector have received much attention in recent decades, understanding how the characteristics of informal work intersect with and shape youths' imagined futures remains understudied. Addressing this gap is crucial, given region-specific increases in the number of youth entering the urban informal sector, particularly across sub-Saharan Africa. This paper focuses on in-depth ethnographic research undertaken in Arusha and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, with 22 young informal vendors aged 15–35. Life-mapping interviews and participatory timeline diagrams were used to develop rich insights into participants' past, present and imagined lives and livelihoods. It extends the concept of 'being and becoming', developed to examine the interwoven nature of youths' present and future lives, by analysing how young vendors navigate the intersection of their past experiences, present realities, and future possibilities through informal work in urban spaces. The article highlights the complex temporality of youths' informal livelihoods by exploring their goals and ambitions, income generating activities, experiences of customer-related challenges, and perspectives on self-employment. Through this, it argues that youths' histories shape their futures as much as the unfolding of their lives in the present. It also positions young vendors as future-makers who actively construct their futures through informal work. In the context of growing socio-economic uncertainty, this paper provides a timely contribution to geographical perspectives on youth by examining how young vendors navigate, sustain, adapt, and reimagine their lives and livelihoods within increasingly uncertain urban contexts marked by high levels of informality.

## 1. Introduction

Globally, young people's abilities to map out and achieve the futures and forms of adulthood they anticipate for themselves have become increasingly difficult because of ongoing and evolving socio-economic challenges. Understanding the uncertainties that youth experience every day and the impacts these have and could have on their livelihood and lifecourse trajectories has become a significant focus of social science research. Across sub-Saharan Africa, young people are increasingly turning to the informal sector in efforts to establish, sustain, and enhance their lives and livelihoods (Gough and Langevang 2016). In response to this, research related to geographies of youth has examined how young people navigate and adapt to the characteristic challenges of informal

work (Mbatha and Koskimaki 2021; Thieme 2021). It has also explored the complex relationship between youths' informal livelihood practices and their transitions to socially accepted adulthood (Afutu-Kotey, Gough, and Yankson 2017; Banks 2019; Dessie 2024), drawing on the concept of 'being and becoming' to analyse youths' interconnected livelihood and lifecourse pathways (see Ansell et al. 2014). The concept of 'being and becoming' helps shed light on how the interplay between the present and future in young people's lives shapes their progress toward futures that hold both individual and collective significance (Adamson 2024; Ansell et al. 2014; Uprichard 2008). Few studies have applied and extended this concept to understand the multifaceted lives and livelihoods of young urban informal workers. This article makes a valuable contribution to this area of research.

The paper begins by examining the present and future in young people's lives and livelihoods, and the relationship between youth and informal work in increasingly uncertain urban environments. Then, I discuss the in-depth ethnographic research I undertook with 22 young informal vendors in Arusha and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. The remainder of the paper analyses how young vendors navigate the intersection of their past experiences, present realities, and future possibilities through informal work in urban spaces. The article highlights the complex temporality of youths' informal livelihoods by exploring their goals and ambitions, income generating activities, experiences of customer-related challenges, and perspectives on self-employment. Through this, it argues that youths' histories shape their futures as much as the unfolding of their lives in the present. It also positions young vendors as future-makers who actively construct their futures through informal work. In the context of growing socio-economic uncertainty, this paper provides a timely contribution to geographical perspectives on youth by examining how young vendors navigate, sustain, adapt, and reimagine their lives and livelihoods within increasingly uncertain urban contexts marked by high levels of informality.

## 2. Young people's lives and informal livelihoods

### 2.1. The present and future in youths' lives

Conceptualisations of 'youth' have advanced from viewing young people as merely future adults to also recognising and examining youth as a stage with distinct experiences and issues (Crivello 2015; Holloway, Holt, and Mills 2019). This aligns with understandings of youth as both a *position* and a *process* (Vigh 2021). Building on these perspectives, social scientists, including human geographers, have developed the notion of 'being and becoming' to examine the present and future in young people's lives (Adamson 2024; Ansell et al. 2014; Holloway, Holt, and Mills 2019; Uprichard 2008). 'Being' highlights the multiplicity of young people's current actions, experiences, and identities, shaped by social, cultural, and spatial contexts (Adamson 2024), while 'becoming' refers to youths' orientations toward the future (Ungruhe and Esson 2017; Worth 2009). Examined together, scholars have highlighted how the present and future continuously interact and overlap within a distinct temporality (Crivello 2015; Stasik, Hänsch, and Mains 2020; Thieme 2021). This temporality connects young people's realities in the present with their imagined futures (Worth 2009), bringing attention to how their current needs, desires, and relationships continually shape and are shaped by futures they envision for themselves and others (Ansell et al. 2019; Crivello 2015; Huijsmans, Ansell, and Froerer 2021). Building on recent research highlighting how youths' pasts shape the present and future (Abebe 2020; Dessie 2024; Huijsmans, Ansell, and Froerer 2021), the paper argues that 'being and becoming' must better account for young people's histories as a form of temporality that influences their futures as much as the unfolding of their lives in the contemporary. As this paper will show, incorporating this perspective ensures that the concept of 'being and becoming' continues to provide nuanced insights into 'youth' as dynamic, relational, and non-linear (Holloway, Holt, and Mills 2019; Vigh 2021).

Youth as 'being and becoming' is a central theme in the youth transitions literature, which examines and contextualises young people's transitions to adulthood. Transitions are widely understood as temporal, spatial, and social processes that unfold across the life course rather than at predefined stages (Assaad and Krafft 2021; Hajdu et al. 2024; Valentine 2003; van Blerk et al. 2022; Worth 2009). Research theorising the temporality of youth transitions across sub-Saharan Africa has deepened insights into young people's complex navigation toward adulthood, emphasising that transitions not only involve envisioning the future but also responding to present circumstances and drawing on past realities that actively shape these developments (Ansell et al. 2014; Dessie 2024; Salvidge 2024; van Blerk, Hunter, and Shand 2024). Across the region, markers of adulthood, traditionally associated with securing gainful employment, getting married, and starting a family (Honwana 2014; Langevang, Namatovu, and Dawa 2012), have become increasingly unobtainable because of neoliberal governance, structural adjustments, and global economic disparities (Esson 2015). As a result, young people face growing challenges in accumulating the resources needed to achieve social adulthood. Transitions have increasingly become delayed, reversed, reinvented, and sometimes, never realised (Abebe 2020; Honwana and de Boeck 2005; van Blerk et al. 2022). Hajdu et al. (2024) also argue that youth can become 'stuck in loops', continuously repeating the same activities without making progress.

'Waithood' has been employed to describe the disruptions young people in sub-Saharan Africa increasingly face in obtaining markers of social adulthood (Honwana 2014; Ungruhe and Esson 2017; van Blerk, Hunter, and Shand 2024). Concerning the complexity of 'waithood', Abebe (2020, 588) explains how it 'signifies young people's embodiment of uncertainty as they navigate the tensions between constraints and possibilities, the past and the present, the immediate and the imagined, and the material and the intangible'. Young people's experiences of uncertainty causes frustration, disillusion, apathy and despair among young people (Stasik, Hänsch, and Mains 2020; Thieme 2021). Yet, this 'waiting' is far from unproductive or static (Abebe 2020; van Blerk, Hunter, and Shand 2024). 'Waithood' is often a dynamic time whereby youth plan and hope for better futures while attempting to manage contexts of precarity (Abebe 2020; Abebe and Ofosu-Kusi 2016; Fast and Moyer 2018; Mbatha and Koskimaki 2021).

Building on these understandings of youth as dynamic, relational, and non-linear, the next section examines how youths' experiences of undertaking informal work in uncertain urban environments play a significant role in shaping the complex interplay between their lived realities and imagined futures.

## 2.2. Youth and urban informal work

The ability to work and provide financial resources is a vital marker of adulthood in many African contexts, defining a person's self-worth and position within the family (Honwana 2014). Through work, youth often imagine they can achieve better futures (Mbatha and Koskimaki 2021; Stasik, Hänsch, and Mains 2020). However, a string of structural adjustment programmes across the African continent since the 1970s has led to the retrenchment of formal sector jobs (Thieme 2018), contributing to persistently high rates of youth under- and unemployment and deepening poverty in sub-Saharan African cities (Fast and Moyer 2018; Mbatha and Koskimaki 2021). In this context, many young people turn to informal work as one of the few viable ways to earn an income and sustain their livelihoods (Banks 2019; van Blerk et al. 2022). Youth are increasingly expected to be 'job creators' rather than 'job seekers' (Abebe 2020; Gough and Langevang 2016), which has contributed to an estimated 96% of youth aged 16 - 24 working within the urban informal sector across sub-Saharan Africa (ILO 2018, 29). In Tanzania, the dominance of urban informal work is evident, with around 54% of urban residents aged 15 and older working within the informal sector (NBS 2022, 47). High levels of informality are particularly concentrated within fast-growing cities like Arusha and Dar es Salaam, which have experienced significant average annual growth rates in recent years (3.3% and 2.1%, respectively) (Ministry of Finance and Planning, National Bureau

of Statistics and President's Office – Finance and Planning, Office of the Chief Government Statistician, Zanzibar 2022, 11)

Young people are highly visible across urban sub-Saharan African contexts through their informal income-generating activities (Gough and Langevang 2016). Their engagements in and across city spaces are characteristically mobile (van Blerk 2016), drawing on strategies to identify and navigate various opportunities and challenges (Langevang and Gough 2009; Salvidge 2022). Urban spaces are central to young vendors' daily economic survival (Thieme 2021) as well as their efforts to accrue the social and material resources necessary for achieving desired and respected forms of adulthood (Cheung Judge, Blazek, and Esson 2020; Langevang and Gough 2009). Young people's experiences in and across these spaces shape both their current realities and imagined futures (Abebe 2020; Crivello 2015; Porter et al. 2017). Building on these insights, the paper explores how spatial dynamics influence how young people experience informal work, shaping the ongoing interplay between the present and future in their lives.

Research on youth and informality across the region of sub-Saharan Africa has found that engaging in informal work in and across urban spaces can provide young people with viable opportunities during times of contemporary socioeconomic uncertainty (Langevang, Namatovu, and Dawa 2012) to cover their basic needs and 'make something' of themselves through developing and maintaining livelihoods in environments where there are few alternatives (Fast and Moyer 2018; van Blerk 2008). In Tanzania and other sub-Saharan African contexts where labour market opportunities are scarce, self-employment within the informal sector has become prevalent (Banks 2019). Self-employed informal businesses have presented some young vendors with opportunities to gain financial independence, valuable skills, knowledge and experience, social networks, the ability to support others, and the means to establish their own households (Afutu-Kotey, Gough, and Yankson 2017; Ayele, Khan, and Sumberg 2017; Barford, Coombe, and Proefke 2021).

However, undertaking informal urban work often comes with numerous challenges, including income instability, long working hours, a lack of suitable vending spaces, and the overcrowding and competitiveness of informal markets (Afutu-Kotey, Gough, and Yankson 2017; Thieme 2018). These difficulties can be further compounded by shifting political approaches to the regulation and recognition of informal workers (Collord and Nyamsenda 2025). In many African contexts, young people are also expected to support family members, which can constrain their abilities to sustain and improve their livelihoods (Mumba 2016). Such challenges intersect with the characteristically overcrowded, competitive, and expensive nature of contemporary urban localities across sub-Saharan Africa (Banks 2016; Langevang, Namatovu, and Dawa 2012). Consequently, many young vendors face growing precarity, with fewer opportunities to develop and sustain their livelihoods and pathways to desired adulthood in contemporary city spaces (Assaad and Krafft 2021; Thieme 2018).

It is crucial to examine how young people's interconnected informal livelihoods and anticipated pathways to adulthood are shaped by the contexts they live and work in (Afutu-Kotey, Gough, and Yankson 2017). Addressing this, the paper extends notions of 'being and becoming' by exploring how youth navigate the intersection of their past experiences, present realities, and future possibilities through informal work, continually (re)shaping their trajectories toward adulthood in urban contexts marked by evolving uncertainties. Given the growing uncertainty facing youth in both the present and future (Mbatha and Koskimaki 2021; Thieme 2018), it is essential to investigate the opportunities and setbacks young vendors encounter in relation to their future-making practices.

## 3. Research with young informal vendors in Arusha and Dar es Salaam

This paper draws on ethnographic research conducted between August 2018 and August 2019 in Arusha and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, focusing on young people aged 15–35[1] engaged in small-scale informal businesses. The project aimed to develop comprehensive insights into the complex, diverse, and interconnected lives and livelihoods of young vendors. Arusha, a medium-sized city

and major regional centre in Tanzania, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania's largest city and economic hub, were selected due to the prominence of informal work in both locations. Conducting research in these two cities facilitated a comparative analysis of youths' informal work practices and experiences, as well as the contextual factors shaping their livelihoods.

The paper draws on the experiences and perspectives of 22 youth participants – six males and four females in Arusha, and six males and six females in Dar – who engaged in in-depth ethnographic research. Among them, seven were aged 15–20, eight were 21–25, three were 26–30, and four were 31–35. Participants took part in semi-structured life-mapping interviews, participatory timeline diagrams, participant observations, and informal go-along conversations. Ethnography provided an in-depth perspective into young vendors' everyday lives and livelihoods. I intentionally employed multiple methods with young vendors to enhance inclusion through choice, acknowledging that individual youth may favour engaging with particular methods over others (Abebe 2009). To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms are used throughout the paper.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants based on age, gender, type of business, and the city they worked in. Initial access was facilitated through youth and gender organisations in Arusha and Dar. All youth participants spoke Kiswahili. Research assistants supported data collection by translating between English and Kiswahili during life-mapping interviews, participatory timeline activities, participant observations, and go-along conversations, enabling participants to clearly articulate their experiences and perspectives. Assistants transcribed and translated all audio recordings and timeline diagrams into English, striving to retain participants' original wording and meaning as closely as possible. All interviews were transcribed verbatim to maintain the authenticity of participants' voices, and I read through each transcript multiple times to develop familiarity with the data. Using an inductive coding approach, I generated codes grounded in participants' narratives and grouped them into themes capturing patterns and relationships across the dataset. To interpret these themes, I engaged in an iterative process of revisiting and comparing codes and themes to identify connections, followed by analytic reflections to explore their meanings and implications. This rigorous analysis facilitated a nuanced understanding of young vendors' diverse experiences.

Semi-structured life-mapping interviews were conducted with each of the previously mentioned 22 participants. A further 9 follow-up interviews were conducted with selected individuals to address gaps and clarify information, bringing the total number of life-mapping interviews to 31. Interviews covered six key areas: background and experience of the city; current work; relationships and support networks; previous work and experiences; gender, generation and work; and perspectives on the future. This approach provided detailed insights into how individuals' lifecourses and livelihoods developed over time and space (Assaad and Krafft 2021), highlighting connections between young vendors' past, present, and future. While the findings, generated in 2018/19, do not aim to represent present-day conditions or experiences, they remain analytically rich for understanding the complex continuities and changes of youth informal work within broader social, cultural, political, and economic contexts (Ansell et al. 2014). At the end of interviews, participants produced hand-drawn timelines using A3 paper and drawing materials to illustrate important moments and experiences in their lives. They were encouraged to include anything they considered meaningful or influential. While many of the key events identified overlapped with interview content, the timelines often prompted richer discussions and gave participants additional opportunities to shape how their experiences and perspectives were shared. Both the interviews and timelines serve as key data sources informing the discussions and analysis presented throughout this paper.

Participant observations and go-along conversations were also conducted with each participant and were crucial for deepening my views and understanding of young people's informal business practices and experiences. These methods were unstructured, allowing for insights into the intricacies of young vendors' activities, their navigation of dynamic urban environments, and their social interactions. Such insights were not accessible through other approaches employed in this study. Observations and informal go-along conversations were always the initial methods used with

participants. Spending extended periods with them, either on the move or stationary, helped build rapport and trust. In total, 37 observations were undertaken, each lasting 6–12 h, with between one and four observations per participant.

## 4. Young vendors' goals and ambitions

Drawing on calls by Ayele, Khan, and Sumberg (2017) to take young people's imagined futures seriously, this study asked participants about their goals and ambitions. Given the focus of the study and work as a significant marker of adulthood across African contexts (Honwana 2014), young vendors often identified business expansion as their main goal. Clara, a 19-year-old female who sold groundnuts in Arusha, explained: 'I will expand my [current] business so I can open a shop selling rice and beans'. Similarly, Esther a 17-year-old female fruit vendor in Dar, commented: 'I want to have a big business […] I will open a shop and sell food and groceries'. When asked how she would achieve this, Esther explained, 'through developing my current business and making sure it is growing'. In other instances, participants stated they would develop their current work to start a bigger business, but were less explicit about what this might involve. Edward a 25-year-old male who sold eggs in Dar, said, 'I will keep doing the small business like the egg business and to grow it to get into bigger business'. Young people were situated in urban environments that constantly evolved, presenting new opportunities and challenges, making it difficult for some to imagine what the future would hold. Nonetheless, most participants, whether or not they could identify the specific business they hoped start in the future, held positive growth aspirations (see Barford, Coombe, and Proefke 2021), perceiving their current informal work as a stepping stone to larger business endeavours. This outlook was tied to their agentive efforts in undertaking informal work in the present (Ansell et al. 2014; Tom 2024) as well as to reflections on the progress they had made over time, drawing on past experiences.

Vendors also identified a range of other goals they hoped to achieve through business expansion and the associated increase in financial resources. Victoria, a 31-year-old female who sold fruit in Dar, stated: 'I want to own a shop or business premises and prepare the future life of my children'. Additionally, Vincent explained, 'my goals are to finish building my house and to have a large business. You know everything starts small, even a baobab tree. After being successful I want to help my family'. Young vendors associated business expansion with 'success' as this would mean they had the financial resources necessary to improve their support to others. They also viewed business growth as a means to achieve socially accepted markers of adulthood, including building a house, getting married, and advancing their education, which are significant across many African nations (Honwana 2014).

In addition, young people also wanted to contribute to society through developing their businesses. Veva, a 26-year-old female who sold eggs in Dar, commented: 'My plan is to save my income so that I can buy a tailoring machine and open a tailoring shop and employ others', while Edward explained: 'my goal is to have my own business […] but also to provide opportunities and support other people below me. Because culturally, in Africa once you succeed you become the light for others'. Providing opportunities for others can be a way young people earn respect and legitimacy within their communities (Langevang, Namatovu, and Dawa 2012). This is another important characteristic of desired adulthood across much of the African continent (Honwana 2014). Through informal work, young people in this study envisaged different ways to position themselves within society to bring about change for themselves and others. Analysing young vendors as 'being and becoming', whose livelihood goals and ambitions both shape and are shaped by their present actions and decisions, provides insights into how their plans are central to their efforts to position themselves as future-makers.

Although many participants were positive about the future, others were less optimistic, highlighting the precariousness of their current situations. Winnie, a 23-year-old female selling fruit in Arusha, explained, 'the difficulty is that I want to achieve my goals, but sometimes the [business]

capital is too small so I can't complete what I have planned to do so'. Emmanuel, a 33-year-old male who sold handicrafts in Arusha, also said, 'once you have big capital, then you can improve your business and attract customers'. Reaching goals was inextricably tied to business success. Business challenges in the present, made planning for and imaging the future difficult, as articulated by Cynthia, a 33-year-old female selling maize in Arusha: 'I have goals, but I do not have a plan [to reach them], because to have a plan I need to have something [a business] that I can do to achieve the plan'. Vendors' narratives concerning ongoing business challenges hindering progress toward their envisioned futures align with experiences of 'waithood', which describes disruptions to young people's pathways to social adulthood (van Blerk, Hunter, and Shand 2024). However, the youth in this study were far from passive. In line with other research, many participants identified business growth as the most viable way for them to navigate challenges (Abebe 2020; Mbatha and Koskimaki 2021) and engage in future-making practices. Notably, youth in Dar were generally more optimistic about the development of their business in the future, attributing this to the city's large population and greater diversity of economic opportunities.

## 5. Income generation in the informal sector

In many cities across sub-Saharan Africa, including Dar es Salaam and Arusha, a significant number of young people are entering the informal sector as a response to poverty and high levels of unemployment (Banks 2019; Fast and Moyer 2018; Mbatha and Koskimaki 2021). While this is not the path for all, for many it presents a means of generating income and pursuing livelihoods in rapidly changing urban environments. This section examines how the incomes generated by young vendors through their informal businesses helped them sustain, and in some cases, advance their lives and livelihoods in the city. Many participants in the study identified that most of the money they earned was spent on paying for necessities. Godfrey, a 25-year-old male who sold eggs in Arusha, summarised the benefits of his informal business activities: 'It [egg selling] is beneficial because I get an income to cover my expenses [rent, water, utility bills, and food]'. Similarly, Victor, a 24-year-old male who also lived and worked in Arusha, said that through his shoe-selling business, he was able to 'get accommodation, food and clothes'. Informal work helped participants meet basic needs, enabling them to sustain their lives in the city. These activities shaped young people's present experiences while also generating hope among some that the benefits of their ongoing efforts provided a viable path for them to pursue their envisioned futures.

Furthermore, this work also helped young people financially support others. Esther explained the multiple benefits of her income: 'It enables me to [financially] support my parents as well as myself through buying some food and paying rent'. Other participants spoke about more specific ways they supported others. Cynthia discussed the ability to provide for her children as a notable benefit of her maize-selling business:

> There is a benefit because it helps me to get what I want for my children and I can buy what they need [...] I support them with things like books when they need them, and things like a bicycle, shoes, and all school needs.

Similarly, Edward explained, 'it [the business of egg selling] means that I can provide basic needs to the family'. Edward estimated that he contributed between 8,000–10,000 Tanzanian Shillings (Tsh) (£2.46–£3.08) to his household every day, which was used to pay for bills, food and water, and other necessities. He also supported his young brother who attended secondary school with money for transport, stationery and uniform. Participants' identification of informal work as a means to support themselves and others aligns with normative expectations of adulthood in many African contexts (Afutu-Kotey, Gough, and Yankson 2017; Ayele, Khan, and Sumberg 2017). For some vendors, the ability to generate financial resources through their business in the city to meet multiple needs fostered a sense of forward momentum (Fast and Moyer 2018). Their present experiences shaped perceptions of informal work as a viable pathway to anticipated adulthood.

Through life mapping interviews and timeline diagrams, other participants reflected on how informal income-generating activities enabled them to achieve more than merely meeting basic needs in the city. Doris, a 20-year-old female fruit seller in Arusha, identified that in addition to paying for necessities, she had also developed her business of selling fruit through the income she generated (Figure 1). I interviewed Doris twice during the research (12 April 2019 and 8 July 2019), and during her second interview she explained the progress she had made since the first interview: 'For the week [around the time of the first interview] I was making 25,000–30,000 Tsh [£7.85–£9.42] in profit, but now I can make between 35,000–40,000 Tsh [£11–£12.57]'. In under 3 months, Doris' weekly profit had increased by 10,000 Tsh (£3.08). She explained how this had happened: 'It is because I have expanded my business […] I also decided to keep chickens to continue increasing the capital'.

For other participants, their businesses had enabled them to achieve markers of adulthood. Benson, a 31–year-old male who sold groundnuts in Arusha, stated: 'I built my house through doing my business'. Another participant, Vicent, a 30-year-old male who ran a crisp-selling business in central Dar, emphasised several things he had managed to achieve because of his work: 'The opportunity which changed my life is selling crisps, because from this business I built a house with two rooms and a sitting room, and I got married from this job'. Vicent's timeline diagram (Figure 2) further illustrates his progress over time.

During a follow-up interview, he summarised the benefits of his business, reflecting on how it had enabled him to develop his life considerably:
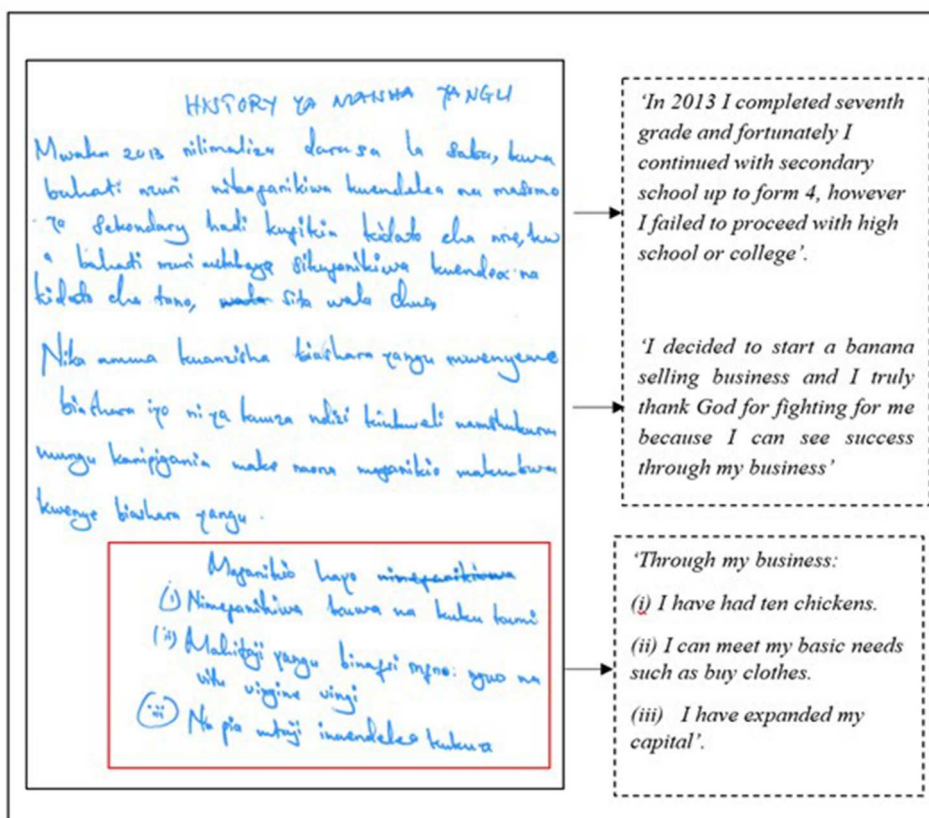


**Figure 1.** Doris' timeline diagram of the progress she made through her informal business.

**Figure 2.** Vicent's timeline diagram of the progress he made through his informal business.

> When I recall my life before I have started this business [of selling crisps] I had nothing. But since I started the business I am thankful that even though I don't have a fancy house I have a place where I can sleep and my life is well and sound.

Doris, Vicent, and Benson reflected on how income from informal work enabled them to build their lives over time (Barford, Coombe, and Proefke 2021; Fast and Moyer 2018). Benson and Vicent also noted achieving markers of adulthood, highlighting how youth can progress in line with social and cultural expectations. The findings emphasise the importance of examining young people's past and present experiences of informal work, showing how such work undertaken in and across urban spaces can support their navigation toward adulthood, shaped by the interplay of past, present, and future (see also Salvidge 2024). These insights highlight the pivotal role informal work can play in facilitating young people's future-making practices, even in urban contexts where life is becoming increasingly challenging and uncertain.

## 6. Income instability and high living costs

Income instability, a common feature of informal work across sub-Saharan Africa (Banks 2019; Thieme 2018), also impacts young people's current realities and imagined futures in the city. In this research, 16 out of 22 youth participants in Arusha and Dar identified income instability as the most significant challenge they experienced working informally. Participants described diverse impacts of this challenge, often highlighting how city life exacerbated these difficulties. Esther, who sold fruit on a roadside in Dar, summarised the complexity of sustaining her life in the city with the little income she generated: 'Small income makes life [in the city] very tough'. Esther had numerous

expenses, such as rent, transport, and food costs, which she was struggling to pay for due to the unpredictability of her income, making life in the city noticeably difficult. Veva, an itinerant vendor who sold eggs in Dar, also reflected on how hard it was to sustain her life in the city on a small and inconsistent income:

> I expected to obtain rent, transportation fare, and food from it [egg selling business], but the problem was when I earned less than 5,000 Tsh [£1.57] in a day, I did not know how to divide that amount to cover all my needs, and 180,000 Tsh [£56.56] for rent [for three months].

She expanded on this, explaining that she had anticipated that through informal business her life would improve. This had not come to fruition:

> I was positive that my life will change after a few months [of undertaking business], but things were not as I expected [...] you can find years are passing and you are here in the city without any noticeable achievements.

Veva found that her income was often inadequate to cover the costs of living in the city and came to realise that she could become 'trapped' in Dar through making little to no progress. Likewise, Emmanuel said: 'I cannot go further [progress with life] because I have to pay the rent and food, and also, I need to expand my business'. Although participants took steps to advance their lives, the small and inconsistent incomes they generated, coupled with high living costs – more frequently cited in Dar than in Arusha – hindered business progression (see also Hajdu et al. 2024). This limited their ability to accumulate the financial resources needed to achieve markers of social adulthood. These circumstances produced feelings of uncertainty, driven by tensions between their current realities in the city and their visions for a better future (Abebe 2020). The findings contribute to notions of 'being and becoming' by illustrating how the challenges of informal work, combined with experiences of living and working in specific urban contexts, cause setbacks to youths' future-making practices and disruptions to their pathways to adulthood.

In addition to this, youth participants also regularly mentioned how the needs and expectations of others exacerbated the challenges of income instability in the city. Doreen, a 30-year-old female who sold cassava in Dar, mentioned how expensive it was to live in the city:

> Things here [in Dar] are very expensive. For just food and flour alone it can cost more than 2,000 Tsh [£0.67] and the maximum income which I earn in a day is 10,000 Tsh, [£3.08] so it is always stressful. How can I spend my earnings to cater for my needs such as food and rent as well as my mother's and children's needs?

Expectations placed on her to support the needs of her mother and children, hindered her ability to make progress. She further explained that, 'Small income and many family needs [creates challenges], because I am sharing my income with them, so I fail to make some steps [with my business]'. Similarly, Winnie, who sold fruit and vegetables at a roadside in Arusha, explained: 'I get money here [doing business], but then something may happen at home, like there is no food. I have to buy food, so instead of saving money I keep using it'. The impacts that supporting family members had on business progression were distinctly gendered. While young women and men fulfilled family responsibilities, only women identified this as a significant challenge, citing a lack of financial resources and opportunities to manage these demands. The findings highlight how gendered expectations around support, informal work income instability, and high urban living costs intersect to hinder business progress. They deepen our understanding of how challenges are produced and contribute to constraining practices of future-making and delaying pathways to expected adulthood.

## 6.1. Customer-related challenges exacerbating income instability

Connected to income instability, 12 participants identified that customers posed notable challenges to the survival and sustainability of their informal livelihoods, further limiting their ability to engage in future-making practices. Moving in and across urban landscapes, informal vendors in Arusha and Dar engaged in a number of strategies to entice customers. One tactic involved offering

customers products on credit. Mumba (2016) identifies that this approach can maintain and strengthen vendors' customer bases. Yet, when talking with Doreen, she mentioned that this approach can be risky as it is never guaranteed when or if customers will pay what they owe:

> The challenge is when people who buy on credit are refusing to pay back, you can find that he owes me 200 Tsh [£0.06] but next time when he is buying another piece and pays with a note, he is becoming mad when I deduct the first debt as well. I am always surprised with customers' selfishness.

Doreen's mention of customers' selfishness is in relation to customers not taking into consideration informal vendors' needs and circumstances. Similarly, Clara explained the impacts of customer-related challenges on the growth of her groundnut business:

> There is challenge like when after selling the groundnuts I have to go back later to collect money but sometimes they [customers] are saying 'you have to come tomorrow'. It [not being paid by customers when expected] has impact because it makes me lose capital. I don't get the expected money for my business as planned and on time […] the impact is that instead of my business growing, I am getting loss.

Godfrey, an egg seller in Arusha, described feelings of anger customer actions and behaviours occasionally evoked:

> When they [customers] are done eating eggs, they just say they don't have money and that 'you should come tomorrow'. But when you go [to them] again, they tell you they don't have money and in the end they don't pay you at all […] I find myself getting mad because what I am expecting is not real and I am failing to fulfil my targets.

Although customer-related issues are everyday challenges informal workers encounter, they also have consequences for the future. Disruptions to the everyday economic gains young people expected to achieve, caused by giving credit on their business, produced uncertainty and brought into question their abilities to grow their businesses. As discussed in Section 4, business growth is central to many participants' strategies to develop their lives and livelihoods. Young people's awareness of the future implications of these customer-related challenges brought about through not meeting needs and expectations in the present, stirred up feelings of frustration, disillusionment, apathy, and despair (Stasik, Hänsch, and Mains 2020). These difficulties had notable impacts on participants' work and caused setbacks to their future-making abilities, which heightened concerns about becoming 'stuck' (Hajdu et al. 2024), unable to make any progress.

## 7. Self-employed informal work and youth development

While it is important not to overromanticise the benefits informal work, it is crucial to examine how self-employment in the informal sector provides young people with opportunities to develop their lives and livelihoods in specific contexts. Through life-mapping interviews, young people reflected on their past and present experiences of work. Many participants had been employed in the past and often drew comparisons between this and their current self-employed work within the informal sector in urban Tanzania.

Most participants who had experienced employment in the past often highlighted the challenges of this work. Vicent, described his experiences of being employed by someone at a local fish market in Dar: 'You cannot get time to rest when you are tired and days off are limited […] you also can get threats of redundancy and sarcastic words'. Many participants who had been employed before becoming self-employed described employment as demanding and erratic. Additionally, financial manipulation was also identified as a significant constraint of being employed. Agatha, a 20-year-old female who sold vegetables in Dar, who was previously employed as a waitress at a hotel in Dar, stated: 'The challenges of being a waitress was the exploitation from the boss. Sometimes you can come to work on time, but a boss can say that you came later and then they will cut the salary'. Likewise, Collins, a 23-year old male selling bags at a local market in Dar, who had formerly undertaken employed construction work on a project in the suburbs of the city, said:

'Working for someone is like slavery because you can do very tough work, but the payment is small, and also sometimes they are not paying you on time'. The oppressive and challenging work conditions young people experience often produce uncertainty around their futures (van Blerk 2008). Participants felt constrained because their pay and daily routines were determined by others, limiting their control over their situations and ability to engage in meaningful future-making practices.

Comparisons between forms of employed work and self-employed urban informal work accentuated the relative opportunities of self-employment. Emmanuel, who had worked in several employed roles, explained:

> You can maximise profit [through self-employment]. Working by myself, I can be free without being under the control of anyone [...] I am comfortable and independent because now I have my own [informal] business compared to when I worked at a barbers.

Nasser, an 18-year old male who sold oranges in Arusha, made similar comments while comparing his current work to his previous agricultural position, where he worked up to 14 h a day and received 50,000 Tsh (£17.49) payment a month: 'My current work [selling oranges] is better than the previous one because now I am depending on myself'. Reflecting on their experiences, most participants noted that self-employment provided greater certainty than employment because they now had greater control over the daily actions and decisions shaping their current realities and the direction of their lives.

The flexibility of being self-employed afforded greater choice in shaping their lives and livelihoods across time and space in the city. Vicent noted: 'I don't have a fixed timetable because it is self-employment. So, I'm free even to move for any opportunity [...] there are lots of opportunities here [in Dar]'. Despite running a successful crisp business in Dar, Vicent expressed that he was well-positioned to make decisions and take action to improve his situation because he was self-employed, which he identified gave him greater autonomy over his movements. Movements are vital to young people's lives and livelihoods (Langevang and Gough 2009; van Blerk 2008), and Vicent anticipated that the flexibility of his current situation would enhance his capacity to react to opportunities – including unforeseen ones – in ways that would improve his future in the city (see Thieme 2021). Collins also explained that self-employment within the informal sector provided the autonomy to pursue and achieve viable life and livelihood plans:

> The opportunity of the informal sector relates to having an income-generating activity and the freedom of pursuing a successful agenda [...] in the informal sector I am not abiding by anyone else other than myself. I believe even those who are employed they have their own [informal] business aside from their [formal] work, so I think this is the foundation of my future life.

As shown throughout this section, young people's past employment experiences significantly shaped their perceptions of current self-employment and their envisioned futures, influenced by changes in the control they had over their lives and their ability to engage in future-making practices. This builds on research highlighting the role of past experiences in shaping future trajectories (Dessie 2024; Huijsmans, Ansell, and Froerer 2021), extending the concept of 'being and becoming' by exploring how young people's histories play a significant role in determining their futures as much as the unfolding of their current realities.

## 8. Conclusions

Drawing on in-depth ethnographic research conducted in Arusha and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, this paper explores how young vendors' diverse and multifaceted lives and livelihoods are shaped by the complex interplay between the past, present, and future. These temporal dimensions emerge in different ways depending on individual circumstances and what young people choose to share. The findings highlight how youth continually (re)negotiate their positions as they strive

toward uncertain futures within dynamic city spaces. The paper makes three key contributions, which are outlined below.

First, building on work that examines how temporalities intertwine with spatial contexts to shape youths' lifecourse and livelihood trajectories (Ansell et al. 2014; Crivello 2015), this research extends conceptual understandings of 'being and becoming' by analysing how urban environments shape informal work activities that, in turn, shape and are shaped by complex, interwoven temporalities. While urban spaces are recognised as central to youths' everyday income-generating efforts (Thieme 2021), less attention has been given to how interactions with these spaces influence different aspects of their informal work, shaping the interplay between the present and future. Challenges such as customer-related issues and income stability compounded by high living costs (especially in Dar), created uncertainty for some participants, intensifying tensions between current struggles and envisioned future (Abebe 2020) and disrupting pathways to adulthood. Conversely, others identified how income generation in city spaces enabled them, and would continue to enable them, to accrue the resources needed to achieve markers of social adulthood. These findings highlight how the diverse aspects of young people's informal work, shaped by specific urban contexts, impact their envisioned futures and efforts to achieve anticipated adulthood.

Second, this paper highlights young people's histories as a form of temporality that shapes their futures as much as the unfolding of their contemporary lives. Addressing a gap in the literature on 'being and becoming', it shows how young vendors' histories significantly influence their present realities, imagined futures, and the interplay between the two. By examining past experiences of informal work, particularly around income generation and employed work, this study offers insights into how histories inform what youth perceive as possible, desirable or risky. These histories are not fixed but are continually revisited and reinterpreted, influencing the future-making practices youth engage in and their pathways to social adulthood.

Third, bringing youth future-making practices to the fore further extends understandings of 'being and becoming' by highlighting young vendors' active roles in constructing their futures through self-employment, income-generating activities, and plans for business expansion. Despite ongoing uncertainties, participants tirelessly attempted to craft their futures in line with individual and collective needs and expectations (Ansell et al. 2019). Moreover, drawing on the concept of 'being and becoming', this paper has developed detailed insights into how the interplay of past experiences, present realities, and envisioned futures shape the complexity of youths' future-making practices. Over time, business growth and self-employment in the informal sector can facilitate future-making and provide youth with opportunities to exert greater control over the direction of their lives. However, challenges such as income instability, customer-related difficulties, and gendered expectations can create uncertainty and feelings of being 'stuck' (Hajdu et al. 2024). These can result in setbacks to future-making practices and efforts to attain markers of social adulthood. Importantly, young vendors often navigate challenges and opportunities simultaneously, meaning that these dynamics will persistently influence their future-making abilities and pathways to anticipated adulthood.

In conclusion, this paper extends notions of 'being and becoming' by examining how youth navigate the intersections of past experiences, present realities, and future possibilities through informal work in urban spaces. It demonstrates how these dynamics continually (re)shape the often fluid and precarious nature of their future-making practices and pathways toward adulthood. As urban conditions and political approaches to informal work continue to shift, future research should further examine how young informal vendors, as future-makers, sustain, adapt, and reimagine their livelihoods in sub-Saharan Africa and beyond.

## Note

1. The African Union, along with many African nations, define youth as those aged 15–35 (African Union 2006).

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## ORCID

Nathan Salvidge http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9716-5156

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