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## Chapter Seven:

### Mobile phone theft, resale and violence in Dar es Salaam

Laura Stark

#### Introduction

In Africa's towns and cities more than those on any other continent, governments seem unable to ensure security for their citizens. The majority of urban residents find themselves 'entangled within power dynamics that position them at the city's margins, literally and figuratively' (Myers 2011: 13). Although urban informality is defined by its 'illegality' from the perspective of regulatory elites (Potts 2007), some informal activities are viewed as predatory or harmful by the urban residents who must deal with them in their everyday lives. These include bribery by officials and service providers, dispossession of inheritance by relatives, brokerage fraud, extortion by local government officials, and the harassment carried out by security guards against street vendors. Taken together, these practices constitute both obstacles to accessing resources by the poor and impediments to residents' abilities to keep their hard-won resources.

In the city I studied – Dar es Salaam – the most feared and disapproved predatory practice was theft (*wezi, kuiba*). In interviews recorded in 2010–2018 from two low-income neighbourhoods in Tanzania, I found that thieves often resorted to violence to obtain what they needed. Thieves were usually the poorest and most desperate of urban predators, had no socially legitimate claims to others' resources and no means of alluding to, or disguising themselves as having such claims. Neighbourhood thieves were always described as male.

Theft is just one practice employed by the poor against each other, but my point is not that the poor exploit each other and are thus responsible for their own poverty. Many lower-income persons cannot choose the resource networks into which they are integrated because they cannot relocate to other places, or because they depend on these networks to survive. Looking closely at systemic social mechanisms of poverty is therefore one means to avoid blaming the poor for their own deprivation (Cleaver 2005: 894).

To understand theft, it is important to recognize that in the cities of Sub-Saharan Africa, money is needed to access everything, and the struggle to obtain money is relentless. Even

‘everyday forms of sociability’ (Olivier de Sardan 1999:19) are intertwined with money to the extent that it becomes impossible to separate the economic from the socio-cultural and the forbidden from the permissible (also Potts 2007):

[In Africa] this monetarization of everyday forms of sociability is the object of much exertion of pressure. [...] the over-monetarization of everyday life obliges all and sundry to engage in a permanent quest of ‘means’ and blurs the distinction between legally admissible and legally condemnable ones (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 19).

In the course of my interviews, it became clear that although local theft in Sub-Saharan Africa has received scant scholarly attention,<sup>1</sup> it involves more than a simple predatory/victim relationship. In this chapter I therefore ask: *How does theft operate in these neighbourhoods? How precisely does it engender violence? What can be done to reduce the harm caused by theft?*

Official discourses on crime are seen by social scientists to be integral to processes of social exclusion, with the boundary between legal and illegal spheres of activity both fluid and politically defined (Wacquant 2002; Penglase, Kane & Parnell 2009). This chapter focuses not on official discourses, but on theft from the grassroots perspectives of residents, local government, and local police. Their accounts emphasized that theft was a practice that unambiguously crossed the line of social acceptability because for the poor, every lost possession was potentially irreplaceable due to the chronic lack of money.

The most commonly stolen item in the neighbourhoods I studied were mobile phones (Han 2012: 2067–2069; Archambault 2017). To analyze why as well as what happened to those mobile phones, I use Arjun Appadurai’s (1986) reflections on the social life of things as a methodological point of departure (see also Pfaff 2010). Mobile phones occupy a ‘commodity phase’ (Appadurai 1986: 17) not only when they are first sold in shops, but throughout the span of their functional existence: they are bought from shops, given as gifts to relatives or girlfriends, lost, found, and passed from person to person in the various transactions described in this chapter (also Archambault 2017:84–85). Among lower-income urban residents, they are always used by *someone* until they cease to function and cannot be repaired at a reasonable cost. I have followed the mobile phones lost and acquired through theft to see where they lead and what this implies for the (lack of) power and agency of persons involved.

## Setting and data

Urban residents of Tanzania's most populous city, Dar es Salaam (pop. 4.36 million),<sup>2</sup> live within a dense and intricate system of niche exploitation and benefit-seeking. Roughly 70 per cent of city residents lives in poor, informal settlements (World Bank 2002), and an estimated 50 per cent of the population in these settlements live on an average income of roughly 1 USD per day, well below the current international poverty line of 1.9 USD (Ndezi 2009: 77–78). Much of Tanzania's poverty today can be traced back to the world recession of the 1970s, resulting in a dramatic decline in real wages of Tanzanian workers and the subsequent economic restructuring programs such as the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) promoted by the International Monetary Fund in the 1980s and 1990s (Tripp 1989; UNICEF 1990: 87; Lugalla 1997).

This chapter is part of an ongoing, university-funded study begun in 2010 and related to poverty and gender in two low-income neighbourhoods of Dar es Salaam, which I have renamed Kijito (pop. 16,000) and Mahalikavu (pop. 12,000) for purposes of anonymity. The physical environments of the neighbourhoods I studied lacked sanitation, sufficient living spaces, easily available safe drinking water, durability of structures, storm drainage, and security of tenure. None of the residents I interviewed received wages from the formal sector at the time of the interview. The neighbourhoods were located within a ward that had the highest incidence of reported crime in the municipal region of Kinondoni (Imori & Pallangyo 2017), and extremely few development projects and humanitarian NGOs were operating there.

In total, I conducted over 300 interviews with residents in these neighbourhoods in order to gain a holistic contextual understanding of the lives of residents. My data was built from in-depth interviews and observations in which interview participants were given a broad latitude to bring up topics that were most important to them. Although I did not conceive of it as such at the time, my fieldwork took the form of 'patchwork ethnography' (Günel, Varma & Watanabe 2020): I visited the same neighbourhoods eight times, interviewing intensively in the neighbourhoods for periods of three to four weeks during each visit. A ninth and tenth round of interviews in 2018 took place through audio Skype accessed through mobile phone by an interpreter living in Dar es Salaam who travelled to the neighbourhoods. The patchwork approach of my data collection ensured a necessary 'slow thinking' (Günel, Varma & Watanabe 2020) and reflection on the numerous topics and challenges encountered in my fieldwork. These challenges included the fact that some interview participants did not know what a university or research study was, and they remained convinced that I worked for an NGO, the most familiar role for a white person (*mzungu*) in Tanzania. Because I was easily identifiable as a foreigner by my skin color and many residents assumed that any white person was extremely wealthy,

everyone assumed that I possessed more money than I would ever need. Nearly every meeting with a Tanzanian local therefore became a negotiation in which I was asked for financial assistance: to buy a house for a taxi driver, help pay for children's school fees, or merely to 'help' in the form of giving cash. This quickly became exhausting, although I understood people's motives for asking (Stark 2020b).



**Figure 1.** Kijito is bordered on one side by a small river. Photo: Laura Stark, 2013.

Theft was a topic brought up spontaneously by the interview participants in my very first interviews, when I asked them about the best and worst aspects of living in their neighbourhood. In subsequent field visits from 2013 to 2017, I focused more specifically on

the topics of theft and other predatory practices in 90 interviews. Of these 90 interview participants, 78 per cent (n 70) were women, and 22 per cent (n20) were men. More women were interviewed due to the fact that they were at home at least part of the day, unlike men who were outside the neighbourhood at work or seeking work. Interviewees self-identified with 37 ethnic groups in Tanzania, reflecting the ethnically heterogeneous composition of these urban neighbourhoods. Eighty-nine per cent of those interviewed were Muslims, and 11 per cent were Christian, which corresponds to religious identification in the sub-wards more broadly.<sup>3</sup> Functioning mobile phone devices were owned by 86 per cent of the men and 73 per cent of the women I interviewed between 2013 and 2017.

In order to find interview participants I approached two NGOs which introduced me to two women who became my key informants. These key informants asked persons in their neighbourhoods if they would agree to be interviewed. For security reasons, they decided not to invite drug users or persons suspected of theft to interviews. Otherwise participants were chosen by them at random and not excluded on the basis of gender, age, or other criteria. Interviews were conducted in Kiswahili, and female interpreters shared similar socio-economic backgrounds with the interview participants.

A limitation of my research strategy was that I did not interview any families of persons identified in the community as thieves. Theft was highly stigmatized and disapproved in this community, and it is unlikely that anyone would have spontaneously admitted to having thieves in their family.

Kijito was the first neighbourhood I visited in 2010. It was bounded on one side by a main road and on the other by a small river. Inside were houses built of cement, arranged haphazardly and connected by outdoor yards and open spaces. There were no roads on which automobiles could easily pass, only paths and corridors between houses. The only vehicles that occasionally entered these spaces were pushcarts and narrow three-wheeled taxis (*bajajis*). Corn and local vegetables were grown in the open spaces between houses, goats were tethered to trees, and chickens roamed the grass pecking at edible pieces of garbage. Despite being near the centre of a city with over four million people, the predominant impression inside both Kijito and Mahalikavu was that of a rural village: palm trees swayed in the quiet breeze, punctuated only by roosters crowing and the occasional blare of music from a radio. Usually only a few residents could be seen walking or carrying out daily tasks in the open spaces between houses. Although garbage and waste covered the uneven ground, the predominant smell in the dry season was that of smoke from charcoal fires. In the rainy season, as I experienced for myself



in March 2015, the unpaved ground became a morass of foul-smelling water and slippery mud, and the risk of flash floods was ever-present.

I was told by older residents that the sub-wards had been farmland as recently as the 1970s. Many current residents had moved to the city decades ago, worked as traders in the city centre, saved enough money and bought land to build a house in this peripheral, unplanned and unregulated area that soon became haphazardly crowded. Their quality of their life worsened over two decades as the real estate value of their land and homes decreased, making it impossible for them to move to other parts of the city with money obtained through the sale of their home. Some homeowners have rented out rooms to tenants, but the amount of money obtained from rent is small in comparison to the cost of food in the city. In Kijito, rents have been among the lowest in the city due to the dangers and difficulties faced by residents in annual flooding during the rainy seasons. Many renters who experience one rainy season move out before the next one, keeping rents low. As a result, Kijito is one of the cheapest housing options for the poorest renters in the city. Like homeowners, the poorest renters cannot easily move to places where rental prices are higher. In both Kijito and Mahalikavu, the majority of homeowners and renters occupied the lowest income and least educated segments of the urban population, and had few options to live elsewhere in the city.

### **Challenges facing local governance**

The municipal government of Dar es Salaam is organized into three districts that are further subdivided into wards and sub-wards (*mtaa*). In Tanzania's decentralized system of governance, even low-income sub-wards have their own local government office staffed by workers who also reside in the sub-ward. In Kijito, the physical office of the local government was located inside the neighbourhood and consisted of a single concrete room with a large table and wooden and plastic chairs. The staff and council members were all sub-ward residents. The local government was responsible for settling disputes and providing the official identification documents needed for voter registration, passports applications, opening bank accounts and getting relatives out of jail. Another of its functions was recording informal land ownership and land transactions.

As in other parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, local authorities in Tanzania face significant challenges due to rapid and uncoordinated urbanization. Tanzania's current decentralized governance model dates from the Local Government Reform Programs (LGRP) of 1997–2008 (UN-Habitat 2002; REPOA 2008). The programs set up institutional structures aimed at greater local level democratization, as well as devolution of authority and resources to communities.

However, decentralization has not solved the problems of service delivery to the poor (Kessey & McCourt 2010). While institutional structures are in place for the diffusion of power to lower levels of government, the actual processes and practices employed in governance do not facilitate this kind of power transfer (Ewald & Mhamba 2014).<sup>4</sup> Sub-ward local governments have always been affiliated with one of the political parties in Tanzania's multiparty system, and according to some interview participants, affiliation or political opposition to the ruling party have been important factors in higher government decisions on whether local governments receive government funding for development projects.

My interviews with local government officers suggested that in terms of planning and executing a unified urban strategy, there were significant gaps in communication between local and central administrative levels of government. At the fiscal level, local governments had neither the resources they needed nor the means to raise funds independently of the central state administration. They were therefore dependent on what was funneled down to them from the highest government levels (Ewald & Mhamba 2014). Local government officers responsible for day-to-day operations (the elected executive officer, his appointed secretary, and the ten elected *mtaa* council members) did not receive salaries for their work. They received only a small travel allowance which enabled them to attend official meetings elsewhere in the city. In the sub-ward I studied, this allowance was only TSh 5000 (roughly two euros) per month in 2013–2015, and was suspended altogether in 2017. The lack of salary meant that in addition to their many duties for the sub-ward, all members of the local government staff had to spend time generating income through their own small businesses.

### **Mobile phones as moveable wealth**

Thieves in the neighbourhoods I studied were reported to be local, unemployed young men aged between fifteen and twenty-five, a demographic that tallies with research conducted on crime in the Kinondoni municipal region of Dar es Salaam more broadly (Imori & Pallangyo 2017). Being unemployed, they were unable to fulfill the Tanzanian normative ideal of a man able to provide for himself and his family (Silberschmidt 2001, 2004; Wamoyi et al. 2010; Plummer & Wight 2011). They therefore had no possibility to make socially legitimate claims on the resources of others. Instead, they obtained these resources by force or stealth, by self-organizing into informal groups and arming themselves, which gave them a physical advantage over residents. In 2010, 2014 and 2017, interview participants complained that various local gangs of thieves with names like 'Rat Road' operated in the areas I studied. Periodically such thieves were jailed or driven away, so that in other years theft was reported to be less common.



Local theft took different forms, including home break-ins at night, thieves lying in wait for lone passersby, or the snatch-and-grab of handbags. The items stolen by local thieves were nearly always money or objects that could be carried fairly easily and resold for enough money to make it worth the risk. Such items included laundry hung outside to dry and chickens foraging in open spaces between dwellings. Even worshippers at the local mosque had experienced theft while they were at prayer, and were told to hide their shoes when removing them before entering the mosque.

The most commonly stolen items, however, were mobile phones (Han 2012; Archambault 2017). Most persons I interviewed in Kijito and Mahalikavu owned a mobile phone. In literature dealing with the global North, mobile phones are often discussed as consumer objects linked to status and leisure. In the neighbourhoods I studied, they were equally, if not primarily, tools of necessity and survival. In Sub-Saharan Africa as a whole, the most common function of mobile phones, especially for female users, is to keep in touch with social networks of support. Especially for the poor, phones are vital for requesting help in times of crisis (Porter et al. 2012; Stark 2020a: 530). Mobile phones are routinely used by the poor to receive money from relatives through mobile money services (Stark 2019). Once a mobile phone was stolen, it was sorely missed and not easily replaced. A second-hand, pirated or stolen feature phone costing as little as TSh 8,000 to 15,000 [5–7 €] required the equivalent of a week's worth of food in this neighbourhood in which many people lived hand-to-mouth each day. By contrast, the middle-classes and wealthy in Dar es Salaam could afford to buy new mobile phones from the shop.

Smartphones are globally the most common valuable item that people usually carry with them. For thieves in Dar es Salaam, mobile devices carried in a person's pocket or handbag represented a high-value package that was easy to carry and hide. Mobiles could also be resold for a sum of money greater than the amount of cash carried by most Tanzanians in public. Worldwide, the unique portability and value of mobile phones has given rise to a lively global underground economy in which stolen smartphones are trafficked across borders and sold in diverse countries.<sup>5</sup>

The persons I interviewed were often dependent on the help and goodwill of relatives and friends to survive, and could not afford to leave a call unanswered, even if answering it revealed the phone to thieves. Mobile devices were easily snatched when users brought them from pockets or bras. The theft experienced by 22-year-old Rukia<sup>6</sup> was a typical example of this:

In 2009, my mother gave me a bag of maize and I was carrying it to the maize-grinding machine in Mahalikavu. And I had my baby on my back. Somebody called me on my phone so I took the call, and just at that moment a young man who had been following me grabbed the phone out of my hand as he ran past. [Interviewer: Could he have stolen it if you had not been on the phone at that moment?] No, he could not have taken it from my skirt pocket.

But phones did not always need to be revealed during use in order to be stolen. Rehema, aged twenty-two, explained that it didn't matter if the device was hidden: 'the thieves will threaten you physically and take it from you.'<sup>7</sup> This was illustrated by the experience of 32-year-old Zawadi, who, when I asked her whether her phone had ever been stolen, related the following story:

It happened to me twice, once last year when I was coming home. Now the thieves know that if a woman is carrying a handbag, she is not putting her phone there, so maybe she keeps it in her bra. Three young men came from behind, one put me in a chokehold with his elbow and the others searched my bra, putting their hands down my front. They found it in my bra, I was wearing jeans and had put my money in my jeans pocket but they were so interested in finding a phone that they didn't notice the money. This happened in Kijito.<sup>8</sup>

One of the most common places where phones were stolen was buses. Thieves either waited for the bus to stop and grabbed the phone through the window (bus windows were open year-round in the hot climate), or posed as ordinary passengers on the bus and stole phones from handbags. The neighbourhoods I studied were said to be considered particularly risky for phone theft from buses. When city buses reached these areas, conductors announced to passengers that they should guard their phones and handbags. Aziza reported how her phone was stolen as she texted someone: the bus was moving slowly in a traffic jam and the phone was stolen through the bus window so quickly that Aziza never saw the thief. Husna described witnessing a phone theft on a bus and being too afraid to raise the alarm because the thief had glared at her menacingly: 'I was afraid to do anything, because [the thieves] always carry weapons in their pockets, razor blades, scissors or a knife'.<sup>9</sup>

Thieves who stole phones from city buses were often *wapiga debe*, young men who began to appear spontaneously at bus stops in the 1990s to shout out the destinations of the approaching bus for passengers unable to read the signs. In return, bus conductors gave them

small sums of money at the bus stop. Zakia,<sup>10</sup> age twenty-eight, described how the *wapiga debe* operated:

Some conductors see the thieves in action and they themselves have once been *wapiga debe*, so they say, ‘I saw you, let’s share half of it’. They are not protecting the passengers. My uncle was a bus driver, he showed me and my sister how the *wapiga debe* work, I saw how they do it. When the bus comes, there are so many passengers rushing and squeezing to get on, they are concentrating on [getting in], and the *wapiga debe* come and pretend they are passengers. There are two or three of them, they push in with the others, they have a half-open bag or backpack and one [thief] grabs the phones or money, and hands it off to the other [thief] in the crowd when the other people don’t notice. The conductors and drivers are afraid of the *wapiga debe*, if they warn the passengers, [the *wapiga debe*] can retaliate with weapons.

### **Circuits of theft and resale: the life cycle of mobile phones**

Where did stolen phones go? Most appear to have been privately resold back to city residents ‘at a very low price’. Thieves could approach potential customers and show them phones hidden in their sleeves that they promised to sell cheaply (Archambault 2017:89), but thieves also resold stolen phones to persons through fences or agents (*dalali*) who lived inside the neighbourhoods:

[Thieves] have agents, they give the phones to the agents, tell them that they can take a percentage if they sell the phone, and the thief will collect the money later. The agents walk around in their neighbourhoods and offer to sell the phone to their neighbours. The thieves only have one certain person [=the agent] whom they trust to give them the money. [...] That agent could be anybody.<sup>11</sup>

Hadija,<sup>12</sup> age thirty-four, told how after her smartphone was stolen, she bought a basic feature phone for TSh 10,000 [5€] from an agent who was a motorcycle taxi driver in his early 30s living with his wife and child. According to Hadija, everyone in the neighbourhood knew that this man sold stolen phones.

The resale of mobile phones was not always supply-driven or at random. It could also be organized. In Hadija’s account, the agent had told her that if she did not see the phone she wanted among the ones he was displaying on his open palm, that she should wait and ‘he would

find it for her'. According to 49-year-old Fatima, a potential customer might tell the agent: 'get me this phone, a Tecno for instance, that costs TSh 300,000 [115 euros] in the shop, but I'll pay you TSh 150,000.'<sup>13</sup> People seeking to buy a phone for half of what it would cost new in the shop did not only 'order' phones from agents but also directly from thieves. In a joint interview, 32-year-old Salma and 27-year-old Khadija told how residents ordered cheap handsets from thieves and received it the same day:

*Salma:*<sup>14</sup> In this place, most of the people are buying phones from thieves, we know how to go to find [the thieves] along the road and you can tell them, 'I want a phone' and they will get you one. They are stealing the phones from [several neighbourhoods nearby], from people passing on the road, even [from people] in cars [...] A stolen Nokia phone might cost [the buyer] TSh 10,000–15,000.

*Laura:* Do the guys along the road go out and steal the phone after the 'order' is placed or do they already have phones they have stolen?

*Salma & Khadija* [animated]:<sup>15</sup> the thieves will say [to the potential buyer], okay, come back in the afternoon or the evening. He is the one doing the stealing and yes, he steals it after you tell him you want a phone. He might go on the bus and put his hand secretly in passengers' handbags and steal it that way while the passengers are not noticing.

As low-income residents sought to replace their own stolen phones by paying a relatively low price for someone else's stolen phone, the practice of theft gave rise to more theft. Theft was thus a systematic and networked practice in which residents were involved not only as thieves and victims, but also as buyers of stolen phones and agents/fences for the resale of devices within neighbourhoods. Demand was driven by desperation, as the poor needed phones for nearly all income-earning and networking activities. While some victims of theft could afford to replace their stolen phones, the poorest urban residents – who were usually women – were left without. Those residents I interviewed who could not afford to replace their phones were perilously isolated even from the help of kin and friends.

Mobile phones thus circulated *from poor owners to poor buyers via poor thieves*. When I asked female interviewees – somewhat provocatively – whether residents therefore benefitted from phone theft because they could buy cheaper phones from thieves, women explained to me that in monetary terms they ended up losing much more than they gained by neighbourhood phone theft. Moreover, the largest problem linked to theft in their opinion was the violence that accompanied it.<sup>16</sup>

Since residents resisted the theft of their property, thieves used violence or its threat to pressure victims to relinquish their possessions before the alarm could be raised. Many thieves carried with them *panga* machetes, razor blades, scissors or knives. Interviewees reported that at least one male vendor walking through their neighbourhood had been killed in 2017 by thieves in broad daylight. The danger of violence for neighbourhood residents was illustrated in the experience of 32-year-old Salma, who in 2017 lived in the house where I conducted interviews every day. On my last day of interviews, Salma came to where I sat with the female interpreter and showed us a large welt on her arm that had not been there the previous day. She told me that on the previous night, she had gone to the main road outside the neighbourhood to meet her child's father, who lived elsewhere and was bringing money for their child's support. Because of the irregular hours he worked as a driver, he could only meet her at night:

I was walking through the neighbourhood, it was dark, I switched on the torch of my phone. I was walking through the narrow passageway between the houses, and I encountered a young man who asked, 'where are you going?' I told him, I am going to the road, my husband called me so I will meet him there, so he said, 'give me the phone'. I hesitated to give it to him, so he took out his *panga* [machete], trying to scare me. He slammed my arm against the wall [she shows the mark it made] and I gave him my phone [...] He was walking around looking for somebody to steal from. I didn't even go to the road to meet with my husband [afterward] because I was afraid, I was trembling ... [with gestures and hand motions she relives the moment the thief took out his panga].<sup>17</sup>

### **Jabali's account**

Salma's narrative is consistent with stories told by other residents about theft. Yet I also wanted to hear the other side of the story, that of neighbourhood thieves. As a non-Tanzanian who visited these neighbourhoods only during daylight hours and always accompanied by at least one interpreter and/or key informant, I did not observe local theft first-hand. Since research participants were pre-selected for me in advance, I was never introduced to anyone whom others suspected had committed theft. It was a general consensus among interview participants, however, that thieves (*wezi*) lived among them in their neighbourhoods and that many of them were addicted to drugs and alcohol. Sometimes when walking through the neighbourhood, my companions quietly pointed out to me groups of young men they identified as alcoholics or drug addicts. I did not ask to interview persons known to be thieves because I sensed that doing so would arouse the disapproval of residents who had otherwise accepted my presence in the

neighbourhoods in which they lived. However, in 2012 I became acquainted with one young man who later turned to theft, whom I shall call Jabali.

I interviewed Jabali the first time when he was 16. At the time, I was not researching the topic of theft, and therefore did not ask specifically about it. Shortly after my second interview with him, I heard from a female resident in the community that Jabali had recently been identified by the local government as a thief. Jabali had come to ask this woman for help, since as a long-time resident she was respected and trusted by the local government. Jabali had promised her that he would commit no more theft, and she had spoken on his behalf to the local government. Three years later, when Jabali was twenty-two, I asked him if I could interview him about this phase in his life.

In his first two interviews, Jabali had already mentioned a major difficulty faced by the poorest youth in his neighbourhood: ‘once children reach the age of 16, the child must be independent, look after themselves, find their own food and income’ (Stark 2018). He also mentioned that he had no support from family members and had to ‘depend on himself’ for survival (Stark 2018), a circumstance that caused him much stress. Both of Jabali’s parents had died and he had lived in his grandmother’s home with his aunt and uncle until his grandmother’s death when he was 12 or 13. Before her death, his grandmother had warned him that he would likely soon be in a difficult position, since she was unsure whether his aunt and uncle would take care of him. A year or two later, although he was allowed to sleep in his aunt’s and uncle’s house, he was not given any of the food they cooked for themselves and their daughter. Needing income, he sought day work in construction, but the number of jobs were few, and obtaining them depended on connections that Jabali did not have. Jabali felt that most of the young men in Kijito he knew were living without one or both parents and had no access to jobs. For this reason, they joined ‘bad groups’ (*vikundi mbaya*) and began ‘smoking, drinking, using marijuana and cocaine’.

When I asked Jabali to describe to me his experiences of theft, he told me that he had begun to commit theft when he was ‘convinced by friends who saw that I had nothing to eat and advised me to join them’. He had stolen mobile phones from passengers at bus stops with a group of three young men for two months. The stolen phones were sold onward to an agent or fence (*dalali*) living in the neighbourhood, who paid Jabali and his companions for the phones based on their list prices in shops. According to Jabali, if a smartphone cost TSh 300,000 [approx. 115 euros] in the shop, Jabali and his fellow thieves would receive only TSh 50,000 from the agent to share among themselves, whereas the agent who sold it onward to a customer for TSh 150,000 made a profit of TSh 100,000.

According to Jabali, after receiving the phones from thieves, the agents threw away the SIM card in the phone and went to a phone repair technician (*fundi sim*) operating out of an open-air roadside stall. This technician would erase ('flash') the memory in the device to delete any information that could identify the previous owner. After flashing the devices, agents carried three or four phones in their pockets to display to customers.

Based on Jabali's and other interview participants' accounts, stolen mobile devices did not appear to travel any great distance within the city before being sold. The resale of stolen mobile devices could thus be risky for the agent if a victim of phone theft suspected that his/her phone had been taken to a particular agent, and then posed as a customer wanting a cheap mobile phone. As Jabali explained, if such 'customers' saw their own phone among those displayed by the agent for sale, they could alert the police. However, since other residents in need of cash also sold their used phones to the same agents, an agent could always tell the police that 'someone came to bring me this phone to sell, so I didn't know it was stolen.' In addition, the police were said to be in a 'good friendship' with thieves and agents because the constant cash flow of this criminal activity created a lucrative opportunity for extortion. Local police were said to typically visit illegal vendors once or twice per week and demand between 5000 and TSh 50,000 each time.

At the same time that the profits from stolen mobile devices went primarily to agents rather than thieves, Jabali and his fellow thieves lacked the necessary capital to set themselves up as agents. Money would have been needed to purchase an assortment of stolen devices to offer customers, to pay the *fundi sim* to 'flash' the phone, and to pay bribes to police. Jabali's location within the cycle of mobile phone theft and resale was thus determined by his economically marginal location in the neighbourhood. He was not supported by his relatives, and he lacked employable skills and education in a context of high youth unemployment.

Jabali told how he had feared that he would be beaten by passengers at the bus stop if one of his victims had noticed the theft and alerted other passengers. His theft remained unnoticed, however, until one day he and a friend stole a phone from a woman walking along the road near his neighbourhood. Unknown to Jabali, the woman had recognized him and went to report him to the local government. The same day, a large crowd of people, some of whom were wielding wooden sticks as weapons, appeared at the house where Jabali was living with his aunt and uncle:

I wasn't there, but there were around thirty people, local government people and residents who had their things stolen, and when they had found out I was one of the



thieves, they were angry. I was told by my [relative] and other friends that they had come looking for me because I had stolen their phones.

Upon hearing this, Jabali went straight to the long-time female resident he trusted most in order to ask her advice. She told him that ‘if you remain quiet, they can come back and beat you and even kill you’. She recommended that they go together to the local government office where Jabali would ask forgiveness and she would vouch for his good behavior in future. As Jabali described, ‘so we went and did that [...] The neighbours now trust me because they didn’t see me steal anything again, so they are living well with me.’

### **Theft relies on violence and its threat**

Jabali escaped the vengeful anger of the mob of residents, but violence against thieves or its threat were mentioned frequently in narratives about theft. In 2013, an HIV-positive boy was beaten by a group of young thieves who stole his antiviral medicine as he walked home one evening. The female head of the boy’s family proudly told me how she, together with twelve of the boy’s relatives living in the neighbourhood, had gone to the thieves’ homes, yelled at them and attacked them physically. There was no recurrence of the theft. Chicken thieves, too, had been caught and physically beaten by residents. In 2017, 55-year-old Halima had one morning seen in her neighbour’s yard

...a man with a big plastic bag chasing a chicken. Some chickens were already in the bag, he was collecting them. At first, I looked at him and was wondering ‘who this is?’, then I shouted [towards the house of] the family who owned the chickens: ‘they are stealing your chickens!’ When the family came out of their house, I showed them the direction the thief had run, and the thief was chased and beaten physically. They asked him where he usually took the chickens he stole, because other families’ chickens had also gone missing [...] He told them that he had sold them to a man who lived in [the nearby settlement]. So lots of people said, ‘let’s go there’.

Halima told me ‘they were beating him so badly I was afraid they would kill him, and I felt responsible since I was the one who had raised the alarm, so I went with them as a witness.’ When the group of neighbours arrived at the house where the thief sold his stolen chickens, they found a large shed containing dozens of chickens. The owner had seen the group coming

and had fled, leaving each neighbour to retrieve their own chickens, and the thief was taken to jail.<sup>18</sup>

Andries Du Toit (2004) has argued that the ability to use violent resistance in the poorest neighbourhoods of Sub-Saharan Africa can be seen as a means of survival and a key form of human capital. For the poorest urban inhabitants in Kijito, the loss of even low-cost items such as clothing hanging on the clothesline or pots and pans left outside for cooking can be a severe setback when households do not have money to replace them. Stolen mobile phones represent an even greater loss of resources, as well as the loss of a residents' primary form of communication with persons outside their locality. Residents of Dar es Salaam told me that when thieves were caught in the act they could be beaten, old car tires stacked on top of them so they could not move, then dowsed with gasoline and set on fire. The police were said to always arrive too late to save the thief or identify the vigilantes.

In fact violence against thieves was not necessarily discouraged by local police. In another story of chicken theft, when the thief was found with the chickens, his neighbours attacked him physically and then called the police. Amira and Zakia described how the police who arrived on the scene had encouraged residents to beat thieves without restraint:

When the police arrived, they said, 'why didn't you beat him until he died? Because we are tired of you [people] here in [this area]: always thieves, thieves. Beat him up and then call us and we will come to take the corpse'.<sup>19</sup>

Zakia added, 'the police will pretend they don't know who killed him,'<sup>20</sup> and Amira elaborated:

The policemen said, 'we arrived late because we knew you will beat him first. If he dies, call us. [...] We are not allowed to beat them. Beat them first, because if we come and take them to jail, their parents will pay the fines and take them out of jail. That is not a good way to punish them'.

The capacity of the local police force to deal effectively with theft deserves mention here. Currently, the ratio of police officers in Tanzania to residents (1 officer per 1050 residents) is well below the international standard of 1 to 450 (Imori & Pallangyo 2017). Police are therefore limited in their means of protecting residents.

The prevalence of vigilante justice and violent reprisals provides insights into why thieves were eager to silence their victims through threats or actual violence until they could

safely escape with stolen goods. The actions of both thieves and their victims contributed to a cycle of violence that created heightened fear for everyone living in the neighbourhood.

The Kijito local government sought to break this cycle of violence by various means. In 2014, trusted young men aged 25–30 from the neighbourhood were hired (through voting by residents) to act as security guards in the area. All residents were asked to contribute TSh 500 (= .18 euros) each month toward these security guards' salaries. Although this experiment was short-lived due the fact that many residents did not (or could not) pay the security fee, the women with whom I spoke described how for a short time, the security guards had made a concrete difference in their everyday lives. 47-year-old Rebeka explained: 'Before, I used to see the young thieves hanging around [...] But now when I wake up at 3 a.m., I see only the security guys.'<sup>21</sup> Security guards escorted women after nightfall to visit clinics and relatives in neighbouring settlements, and the female residents with whom I spoke believed that their visible presence discouraged thieves.

During the worst waves of theft in 2010, 2014 and 2017, the local government also asked police to help residents fight back by training them to band together and arm themselves when riding buses where armed thieves had previously struck. In 2015–2017, the newest sub-ward executive officer, himself a long-time resident, was reported by interview participants to be working energetically to eradicate thieves from the area, and his zeal was widely appreciated by residents. In one example, he recruited a group of male residents to make a citizens' arrest of a family of well-known thieves. After this, other thieves stayed away from the area for months, afraid to return.

### **Theft in a web of social relationships**

Most thieves operating in neighbourhoods were known to residents: 'they are our children', as one woman put it. In 2016, the new local government officer in Kijito had asked residents to inform him if they 'saw a room occupied by five men together',<sup>22</sup> so that he could investigate whether they were operating as thieves. This strategy may have worked for thieves who did not have family members living in the neighbourhood. The majority of thieves, however, were said to be young men residing with relatives. This complicated efforts by the local government to eradicate theft. In addition, the agents that received stolen goods and resold them to residents were also neighbours appearing to live ordinary lives.

Although morally condemned in this community, theft could best be characterized *as a relationship* organized through a complex social web of benefit-seeking and survival. Within this web, residents had developed their own tactics for minimizing the risks of living alongside

thieves. One tactic used by residents was to remain on good terms with thieves in order to avoid being targeted for robbery. Some interviewees felt that thieves would not ‘do anything to the long-time residents here, because they are the children of neighbours and are known to us’.<sup>23</sup> Some women I interviewed told of having obtained positive results from being polite to local thieves or giving them a little money for food or cigarettes when they crossed paths in the neighbourhood. Halima described her experiences as follows:

Yes, if you want to be in good relations, when you pass by in the afternoon and they ask you for money, say, for a cigarette and you give it to them, and then at night they come, many of them in group, and if some of them recognize you as having helped them, they may say, no, don’t bother her, she is my sister, they may even escort you home. If you refuse, they may steal from you at night.<sup>24</sup>

Young women who had been in intimate relations with local thieves might receive good treatment from other thieves in the same gang. Zuhura, a woman in her twenties, told that: ‘I used to be in relationship with one of them, there was a group of five of them, so they are not stealing from me because I am their ‘sister-in-law’’.<sup>25</sup>

Interview participants also told that if one were on good terms with an agent who sold stolen phones one could – if one acted quickly – use this relationship to retrieve stolen phones held by the agent. Zakia<sup>26</sup> told that when her stepfather had been robbed at night near his home, he knew that his stolen phone would be brought to his neighbour, a well-known agent for thieves. He asked the agent to return the phone if it came to him, and the agent agreed. The next day, Zakia’s stepfather found his phone among the stolen phones that had been delivered to the agent. Also Fatima, a long-term female resident in her neighbourhood, told of having retrieved her daughter’s stolen phone in this way.

When agents returned phones without compensation to owners with whom they were acquainted, they were calculating ‘stakes that are social and not easily quantified’ (Bourdieu 1977:177; Appadurai 1986). The stakes in this case were neighbourly assistance and residents’ silence and acquiescence regarding agents’ activities. The alternative was the possibility that neighbours could retaliate with collective violence or rouse the local government or local police to action.

Thieves, too, were motivated to stay on good terms with neighbours. Survival in low-income settlements depends on obtaining a great deal of informal knowledge conveyed by word of mouth. Such information includes informal medical advice, where a construction job might

be available, and where piped water is flowing on which day of the week. Relationships with neighbours who can provide this advice need to be constantly cultivated and maintained, not only for one's own benefit but also for one's family members. Knowing their potential victims too well presented thieves with a dilemma: how to find victims from whom to steal while maintaining ties with neighbours and avoiding the risk of being recognized by them? In Jabali's example, a neighbour's recognition led to a mob of angry neighbours gathering at his home. Thieves needed to invest in social networking like everyone else, but as 19-year-old Mwanaisha<sup>27</sup> put it, 'if everybody here gives them money [to stay on their good side] and has a relationship with them, then who are they going to steal from?'

Local thieves used two main tactics to circumvent this problem. The first was to rob homes at night while occupants slept so victims could not know the identities of the thieves. The second, reported to be a relatively new strategy, was to trade places with thieves from other areas, cooperating with outside groups of thieves to steal from each other's neighbourhoods. Each thief gave a percentage of the value of the goods to the home gang. Interviewees explained that 'thieves cooperate and swap territories because they are known in their own area';<sup>28</sup> 'what they do is exchange places [...] they don't want people from here to know that they are stealing'.<sup>29</sup> Through this strategy, local thieves were able to maneuver around residents' efforts to stay on good terms with them. Khadisa, a 32-year-old mother,<sup>30</sup> concluded that 'the ones you don't know, you can't stay in good relations with.'

### **Concluding discussion**

Mobile phones are personal technologies used near-universally, and for urban users in the low-income neighbourhoods I studied, these material objects represent a form of survival capital. Yet beyond their use as a capability-enhancing technology, mobile phones are also key commodities to be traded for cash. What enables their transformation into such commodities are the dynamics of theft and demand in informal neighbourhoods, and the role of the poor as consumers who drive the demand for stolen, low-priced devices.

For many residents in urban neighbourhoods, the affordability of mobile phones thus depended on activities viewed as predatory by residents themselves. The practice of theft gave rise to more theft, as low-income residents sought to replace their own stolen phones by paying a relatively low price for someone else's stolen phone. Theft could also be directly motivated by 'orders' placed by potential customers.

In the end, neither thieves nor their victims in these neighbourhoods were empowered by theft. Thieves earned a sparse income, but this did not increase their social status or help

their income-earning chances later. In fact, thieves had to live in constant fear of incarceration and violent retaliation. They took nearly all the risk but extracted only a small share of the value obtained through the resale of the stolen phones. The remainder was distributed between agents (*dalali*), phone repair technicians (*fundi sim*), and policemen who expected bribes.

When thieves stole from neighbours, they were forced to take into account the fact that their families' relied upon the same neighbours for help and goodwill. Agents served to separate the act of theft from the customers who bought resold phones, an important issue when thieves were known personally to many potential resale customers. Overall, residents maneuvered to maintain a relatively conflict-free relationship within the neighbourhood, which was important for all parties concerned, since there was often nowhere else they could afford to live.

Yet conflicting interests between thieves and other residents meant that friction was inevitable. The centrality of mobile phones in the lives of the poor brought dangers to their users: mobile phones were attractive to the very urban predators most likely to resort to violence. The possibility of violent retribution by residents increased the incentive for thieves to threaten their victims with violence in order to force them relinquish their possessions quietly and not raise the alarm. In turn, the violence used by thieves hardened the resolve of victims to resist collectively.

The ultimate catalyst in the cycle of theft and resale, however, was neither thieves nor their victims, but two aspects surrounding mobile phones themselves. The first was the physical characteristics of the mobile devices which facilitated the ease with which these devices could be snatched and hidden from view by thieves. The second was the enormous socio-economic gap between the purchasing power of the middle and upper classes in Dar es Salaam and that of the poorest who nevertheless needed phones for communication. Extreme poverty, high unemployment, substance addiction and insufficient access to mental health care fed local cycles of violence. In my interview data, these cycles had only been broken by assistance from the local government.

A closer look at key role of Tanzania's local government in addressing the harm caused by theft is therefore warranted. Although Tanzania's decentralized governance practices have clear gaps in communication and resource transfer between governmental levels, there is much – as yet unrealized – potential for local governments to assist poor residents against predatory practices. Elected local government officers during the period 2010–2017 helped residents protect themselves from violent theft and provided significant support mechanisms to residents. Residents, in turn, cooperated with the local government and police in anti-theft operations.

Strengthening the resource base of elected local governments could be a key intervention in breaking the cycle of violence in theft. More resources would allow local governments to deter theft among unemployed youth. Young men could be offered work as neighbourhood security guards, an experiment that proved successful for a short time in the neighbourhood area studied, but that ultimately foundered due to the inability of residents to pay security guards' salaries themselves.

My ten-year fieldwork indicates that activity by thieves in Kijito waxes and wanes as particular groups of thieves are driven out by residents, die from violence, illness or drug addiction, or abandon this form of income generation. Future research could examine local theft as an activity with its own life-cycle dynamics, in which young unemployed men are eventually replaced by other, younger men who are equally desperate.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Exceptions are Newell (2006) and Archambault (2017).

<sup>2</sup> National Bureau of Statistics Tanzania (2013).

<sup>3</sup> Although no official census data exists on religious affiliation in Tanzania, an administrator in Kijito's local government estimated that Sunni Muslims comprise 75–90 per cent of the residents living in Kijito, and that Mahalikavu had a similar demographic structure.

<sup>4</sup> In 2002, UN Habitat defined the institutional and legal framework regulating relations between central and local governments in Tanzania as “complex, excessively and self-defeatingly control oriented”, as well as “somewhat ambiguous and fragmented”. The central government was also criticized by UN Habitat for exercising excessive fiscal control over local governments (UN-Habitat 2002: 70).

<sup>5</sup> (Garreton, & Schodt 2015); <http://www.sfweekly.com/news/the-life-of-a-stolen-phone-for-the-smartphone-industry-theft-is-a-part-of-the-business-model/>; <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/09/150909-inside-global-trade-stolen-smart-phones-brazil/>; <https://www.wired.com/2014/12/where-stolen-smart-phones-go/>

<sup>6</sup> Rukia, 22-year-old, married mother of four children, primary school education. All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of interview participants.

<sup>7</sup> Rehema, 22-year-old married mother of four children, primary school education.

<sup>8</sup> Zawadi, 32-year-old mother of one child, primary school education.

<sup>9</sup> Husna, 45-year-old mother of four children, primary education.

<sup>10</sup> Zakia, 28-year-old woman, unmarried, university education.

<sup>11</sup> Mariam, 24 year-old mother of one child, secondary school education.

<sup>12</sup> Hadija, 34-year-old mother of two children, primary school education.

<sup>13</sup> Fatima, 49-year-old mother of six children, primary school education.

<sup>14</sup> Salma, 32-year-old mother of one child, primary school education.

<sup>15</sup> Khadija, 27-year-old mother of three children, primary education.



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- <sup>16</sup> For more on the prevalence of violence in Dar es Salaam, see Moyer (2003).
- <sup>17</sup> Salma, 32-year-old mother of one child, primary school education.
- <sup>18</sup> Halima, 55-year-old mother of three children, one year of primary education.
- <sup>19</sup> Amira, 29-year-old mother of three children, primary school education.
- <sup>20</sup> Zakia, 28-year-old woman, unmarried, university education.
- <sup>21</sup> Rebeka, 47-year-old mother of one surviving child, primary school education.
- <sup>22</sup> Amira, 29-year-old mother of three children, primary school education.
- <sup>23</sup> Rebeka, 47-year-old mother of one surviving child, primary school education.
- <sup>24</sup> Halima, 55-year-old mother of three children, one year of primary education.
- <sup>25</sup> Zuhura, in her 20s, no children, primary school education.
- <sup>26</sup> Zakia, 28-year-old woman, unmarried, university education.
- <sup>27</sup> Mwanaisha, aged 19, no children, secondary school education.
- <sup>28</sup> Amira, 29-year-old mother of three children, primary school education.
- <sup>29</sup> Neema, aged 30, no children, no education.
- <sup>30</sup> Khadisa, 32-year-old mother of one child, primary school education.

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