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# Introduction

## Beyond precarity in sub-Saharan Africa

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The contributions in this special issue are all based on the ANTHUSIA project – a multi-disciplinary research project in the Anthropology of Human Security in Africa conducted by a consortium of four universities in Aarhus (Denmark), Edinburgh (United Kingdom), Leuven (Belgium) and Oslo (Norway). It has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement no. 764546 and has trained 16 early stage researchers.

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Narratives of Africa elicit an image of suffering and precarity on one extreme and glorifying creative informality on the other: both are misleading. So how do we move beyond such narratives while still acknowledging the precariousness of life in specific situations?

According to Standing's (2011) influential analysis of 'the new dangerous class', the concept of the precariat designates a particular socio-economic class as an outcome of neoliberal capitalism, which tends to put profits before people. At the same time, it should be kept in mind that the broader concept of precariousness has a universal applicability and could be said to refer to our shared human condition. As Butler (2006) put it, we are all corporeally vulnerable in matters of life and death and live socially, depending on one another. Precariousness is 'distributed unequally', and not all lives are equally precarious. As a concept, precarity refers to enhanced precariousness for some, known as the 'precariat'.

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The designation *Beyond precarity* does not, accordingly, signal that lives are usually, or ever, devoid of precariousness, insecurity and uncertainty. Rather, it is the contributors' wish to shift attention beyond a recognition of immediate (im)possibilities and beyond the apparent 'suffering subject' (Robbins 2013). A critical interrogation of the concept of precarity requires moving closer to its locations and exploring the inherent possibilities of lives typically labelled, from afar, as precarious. We must engage ethnographically and existentially with the lifeworlds inhabited by the precariat, the 'rhythms of endurance' (Simone 2018) and how Africans actively 'make their worlds inhabitable' (Das & Randeria 2015: S4). Briefly, we need to understand how they produce a 'surplus' (Arendt 1958) to life, beyond mere sustenance, survival and makeshift improvisation.

The intention is not to discard the concept of precarity. However, through experience-near, ethnographic descriptions of a multiplicity of lives and places in various locations across Africa, we show how conditions typically described with blanket terms such as precarity and vulnerability, refer to lifeworlds quite discrete and carry different potentials, constraints, possibilities and hopes.

How can fragile repertoires of grappling with scarcity and precariousness be assembled? Di Nunzio (2019) refers to 'the act of living': how does one live meaningfully within marginality, precarity or subjugation? The condition of uncertainty allows street vendors in Addis Ababa to 'think of their lives as open-ended and of their condition of marginality as neither final nor irreversible' (Di Nunzio 2019: 196), allowing them to nurture hope. Wherein lies the possible of the liveable life in conditions of heavily constrained options, and wherein lie the limits of the possible?

These fragile repertoires find root not so much in overt or manifest windows of opportunity or passive waiting in despair but rather in everyday tactics for survival, the active searching for small and sometimes trivial chances whenever they briefly open up, frequently fuelled by more encompassing and definite hopes for less uncertain and more prosperous futures. These articles take such tactics as starting points for further exploration. Seen as a whole, this special issue brings heterogeneous ethnographies together through a shared focus on how Africans in precarious situations develop their everyday practices of getting by as a way of life.



**Fig. 1.** *The future is unknown according to Mister Mohammed, who tries to make a living as a tailor in a small, makeshift workshop adjacent to his bedroom. Accra, Ghana, March 2022.*

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Van Dijk addresses how Burkinabe with mental troubles actively search for meaning, a cure and an acceptable understanding of their own situations. Larsen and Van Wolputte look at how journalists in Namibia respond to precarity by mobilizing communities to form social movements through informal networks. Baann considers how Sierra Leonean fishermen create marginal gains through instability and bodily work, thereby eking out a living and succeeding in nurturing and caring for their families. Wainman, Whyte and Meinert focus on how South Sudanese refugees manage precarity materially and how they tactically appropriate and transform humanitarian donations into wished-for items, suggesting that a state of exception can be normalized, these practices being woven into everyday camp life. Ameso and Prince address how Kenyan patients and health workers tactically create care infrastructures through people and social networks when the official system and strategy of providing health for all fail to work. Finally, Nielsen and Eriksen describe how small-scale business owners in northern Uganda, forced to improvise owing to many uncertainties, adjust to and make a living amidst the chronic instability of grid electricity supply.

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Poverty and misery should not be glossed over, and there is no reason to glorify the precarity characterizing the informal economy. Nevertheless, this special issue shows that economically uncertain and existentially precarious lives in contemporary African societies are not instances of failed development nor a state of exception to be resolved through aid or other external interventions. Instead, they are acts of living a shifting, flexible, even tactical and cunning form of normality. ●