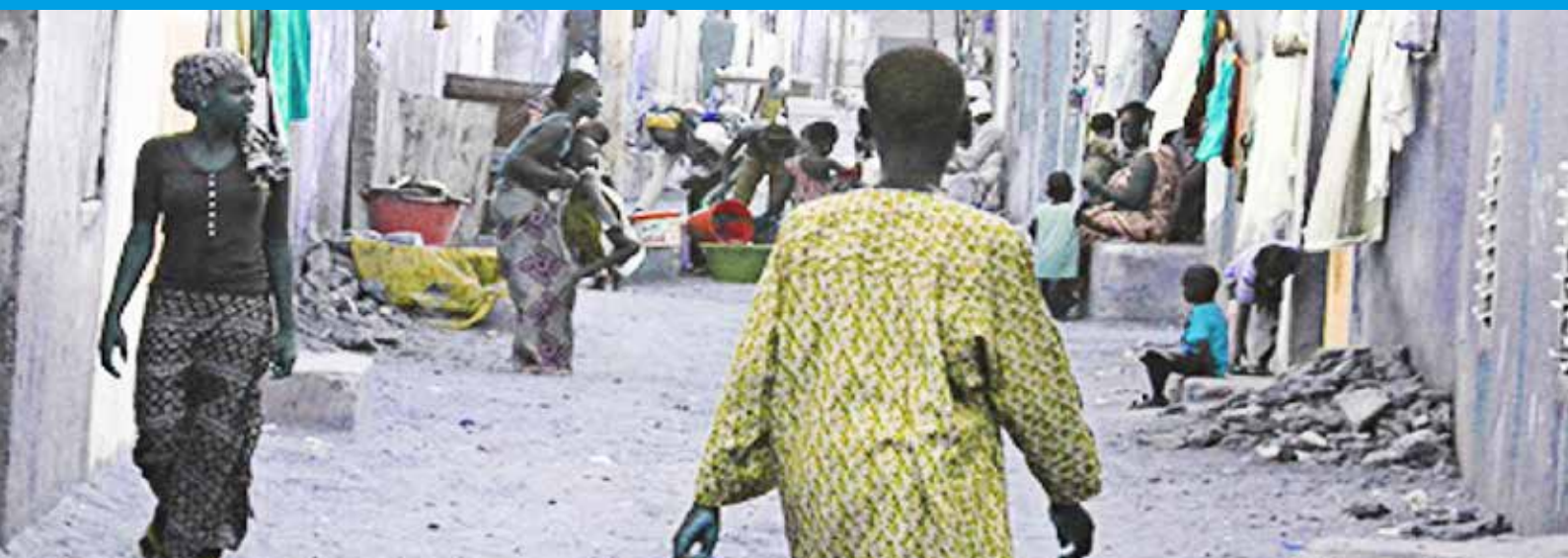


'BEREAVEMENT AWARENESS' IS CRUCIAL TO ACHIEVING THE 2030 AGENDA: EVIDENCE FROM SENEGAL

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The death of a family member is not just an economic shock, as it is often referred to in the context of the global South. Evidence from Senegal suggests that economic impacts of bereavement are interwoven with emotional and social impacts, resulting in a range of disruptions and pressures on children and families. Recognising these impacts and developing 'bereavement aware' policy and programming is crucial to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals.

Introduction

The loss of a close family member is a significant life event which may have a range of economic, social and emotional consequences for many children and families. This study provides the first evidence of the complexities of the impacts of bereavement, especially for children, in an urban West African context.

Many death and bereavement studies conducted to date are rooted in medicalised and individualised frameworks developed in the global North. The available literature on the social aspects of death in Africa tends to focus on widowhood mourning rituals, funerals, or on AIDS-related orphanhood.

Very few studies have explored the material, social and emotional dimensions of loss for families, which this study sought to address.

Bereavement and loss are not explicitly mentioned in the 2030 targets for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the overwhelming emphasis of the Goals is on economic and material issues. Yet addressing the consequences of family death and ill health relate directly to over half of the goals (see Box 1). Bereavement is therefore a crucial development issue, especially for children, that needs to be recognised. We outline how a **'bereavement aware'**¹ approach can be incorporated into development policy and programming.

¹We recognise that 'bereavement' is a problematic term and cannot be easily translated from English into other languages (Evans et al. 2017).

Box 1: How bereavement relates to the Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2016)

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



SDG 1 calls for an end to poverty in all its manifestations by 2030. It also aims to ensure social protection for the poor and vulnerable, increase access to basic services and support people harmed by climate-related extreme events and other economic, social and environmental shocks and disasters. Targets 1.1-1.5 are directly relevant to the economic and social impacts of bereavement on children and families.



SDG 2 aims to end hunger and all forms of malnutrition by 2030. It also commits to universal access to safe, nutritious and sufficient food at all times of the year. 'Poor' and 'middling' households affected by bereavement in urban Senegal often worried about money to pay for food.



SDG 3 seeks to ensure health and well-being for all, at every stage of life. The Goal addresses all major health priorities, including reproductive, maternal and child health; communicable, non-communicable and environmental diseases; universal health coverage; and access for all to safe, effective, quality and affordable medicines and vaccines. Improving access to healthcare and alleviating the costs of care for sick and dying relatives was the second key policy priority of participants affected by bereavement in Senegal. The reference to 'well-being' here is one of the few examples in the SDGs where emotional dimensions may be included.



SDG 4 seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Targets 4.1 - 4.7 are all relevant to the educational outcomes and training of bereaved children and youth, particularly girls.



SDG 5 aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Many of the targets are directly relevant to bereaved girls, widows and other women affected by bereavement whose domestic and care work may increase and/or they may become the main income-earner following a death. Target 5.4, in particular, highlights the importance of recognising and valuing unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate.



SDG 8 aims to promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all. This is particularly relevant to bereaved young people, parents and other family members who may need to replace lost income following a death and was a key concern identified by young people in Senegal, some of whom needed to take up paid work after the death in order to contribute to the household.



SDG 10 calls for reducing inequalities in income as well as those based on age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status within a country. Social and economic inequalities related to bereavement and/or status as a widow, widower or orphaned child or young person should be recognised here.



SDG 11 aims to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. Target 11.1 regarding access to affordable, safe housing and basic services may be a particular concern of widow- and other female-headed households, in addition to widower-headed households with young children living in low-income neighbourhoods (Evans, 2015).



SDG 16 aims to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. Target 16.1 aims to significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere. Violent, accidental and untimely deaths were a profound shock to children and adults in Senegal and these kinds of death may be particularly difficult to come to terms with. Target 16.3 aims to promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all. Being able to inherit and own property promotes the economic and emotional security of widows and their children in urban areas (Evans, 2015). Disputes about asset inheritance following a death may require legal support and access to justice, particularly for widows in polygamous unions with low levels of literacy and education and who lack legal support and advice.

Study design

The research aimed to investigate the material and emotional significance of a death of a close adult relative for family members of different genders and generations in urban Senegal. The research focused on Dakar, where half of all urban residents lived in 2013 and Kaolack, a major, but much smaller city, with a population of 338,760, located in the groundnut producing region (ANSD, 2014).

A qualitative methodology was selected. A diverse sample of thirty families (15 in Dakar, 15 in Kaolack) predominantly from the three largest ethnic groups (Wolof, Hal Pulaaren and Serer) was recruited. In-depth interviews were conducted with 59 family members, including 9 children (aged 12-17), 21 youth (aged 18-30), 29 middle and older generation adults (aged 31-77). Four focus groups were conducted with 24 women and young people. Interviews were conducted with 23 local and religious leaders and governmental and non-governmental representatives at local and national levels.

Six participatory workshops were held in Dakar and Kaolack to discuss the findings and conduct a ranking exercise of policy and practice recommendations with 45 family and community participants. Two policy workshops were facilitated with 29 strategic stakeholders in Dakar and Kaolack.

Findings

1. How does a family death affect the psychosocial wellbeing of children and adults?

Many young people and adults missed the company, advice and support of deceased parents and relatives and felt 'alone' despite often being surrounded by family members, friends and neighbours in the immediate aftermath of the death. Young people and adults felt that a mother or father was 'irreplaceable' and that they lacked the advice and guidance that a loved parent or relative had previously provided.

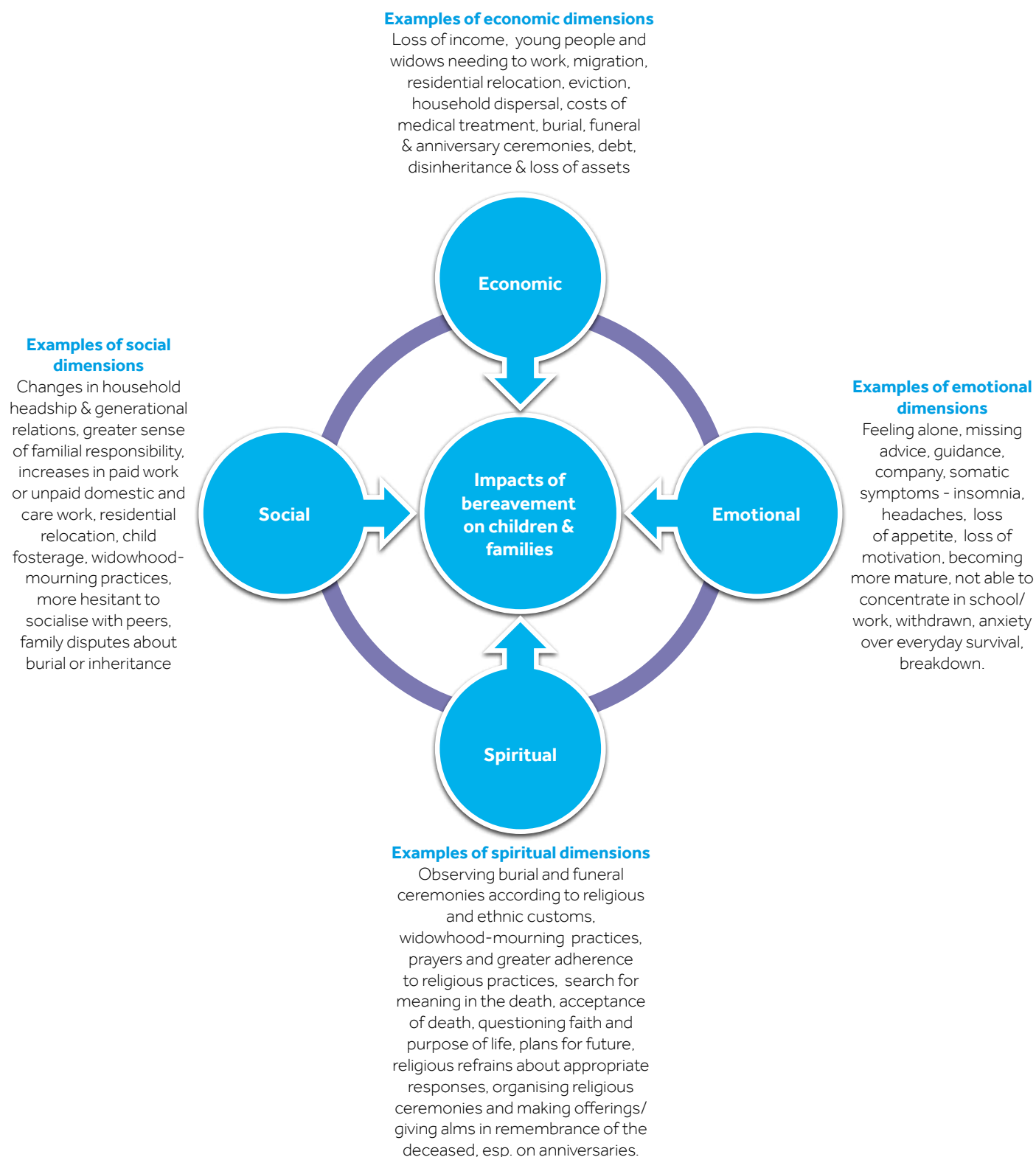
The research found that some bereaved young people experienced a temporary loss of motivation and direction, which could have negative impacts on their education and employment prospects. However, religious faith appeared to help young people and adults make sense of the death.

As Figure 1 shows, the economic, social, emotional and spiritual dimensions of a family death are interconnected and may result in a range of negative impacts on children and families, while bringing more mixed effects for others. Loss of income was intrinsically bound up with the emotional impact of

the death and could lead to anxiety and even despair at how to face problems without a much loved spouse or relative.

The upheavals and changes in families' circumstances, particularly among 'poor' and 'middling' households in Senegal, resonate with findings from the US and UK that a death may bring a 'cascade of events' into play (Christ, 2000). Robust evidence from the global North suggests that multiple difficulties in children's lives – including family deaths – may be associated with unwelcome long term outcomes (Ribbens McCarthy, 2006; Penny and Stubbs, 2015).

Figure 1: The four interconnected dimensions of bereavement and their impacts on children and families





2. How does a relative's death affect paid work and unpaid care responsibilities within the family?

A family death constitutes a 'vital conjuncture' (Evans, 2014), a moment of change and transition, which may lead to a change in household headship and a re-ordering of family roles, caring responsibilities and generational relations. The loss of income and care provided by the deceased often meant women and young people had to increase their economic activities and some young people had to abandon their schooling. Some young people and adults migrated to other cities or internationally in search of work opportunities, many children had to move to live with relatives to continue their education, and some parents struggled to provide for young children. While child fosterage practices could be a practical means of care after a death, they could also separate children from surviving parents and/or separate siblings, which could be difficult for children.

Some young people's, especially girls', caring and domestic responsibilities increased following a death, particularly that of a mother or older sibling, which could have detrimental impacts on their education. Young people often provided emotional support to siblings, surviving parents and other bereaved family members.

Poorer households were more likely to suffer major disruptions, while 'comfortable' and 'middling' households were less likely to have to make major adjustments.

3. What support are bereaved children and families able to access in the global South?

Informal support was crucial to many families' survival following the death of a relative in urban Senegal. The majority of interviewees relied on informal networks of family, friends, neighbours and colleagues for material, practical and moral/ emotional support. Some also drew on support from local and religious leaders or from other members of associations or their faith community. Only a tiny minority mentioned receiving any support from formal service providers, such as government financial assistance through local social services, the national programme of family security grants (cash transfers), the City Council or NGOs. Most participants, including local and religious leaders, were not aware of any support services or assistance that might be available to bereaved families in their neighbourhood.

Conclusion

This study has revealed how the economic, emotional, social and spiritual dimensions of a death are intrinsically interwoven and may have significant negative repercussions for children and adults. Widespread poverty, very limited social protection and welfare services and religious and moral imperatives about the need to carry on, alongside the mixture of emotions that accompany loss and the re-ordering of family relations and responsibilities, make a family death not just an economic shock, but an economic, social, emotional and spiritual struggle to survive and 'succeed' in life.

The potential impacts of bereavement, both short and longer term, during childhood and youth and any gendered differences, in addition to the factors which may build young people's resilience, warrant further robust qualitative and quantitative longitudinal research in Senegal and elsewhere in the global South, in line with such research in Anglophone and western European countries (Ribbens McCarthy, 2006; Akerman and Statham, 2014; Penny and Stubbs, 2015).

Implications and recommendations

Development policymakers and practitioners should recognise bereavement as a pressing development issue, especially for children, and develop a '**bereavement aware**' approach within development policy and programming. As Box 1 shows, the potential consequences of a family death and ill health relate directly to over half of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

How can a 'bereavement aware' approach be integrated into development policy and programming?

A 'bereavement aware' approach should be underpinned by a recognition that bereavement does not just affect individuals or households, but rather can have major repercussions for children and adults who are reliant on complex and extensive family and community support networks. When assessing and providing support to children and families, the involvement of a wider range of family members, neighbours, local and religious leaders and informal associations may help to link up and enhance both the formal and informal support systems in order to ensure that the most marginalised children and families affected by bereavement do not fall through the gaps.

A 'bereavement aware' approach does not need to be costly, but could have multiple benefits for children and families in diverse circumstances and help to meet a range of development goals. Suggestions include:

- **Adjusting the criteria of existing cash transfer and other social protection programmes** to recognise the potential economic, emotional and social vulnerability of children and families following a relative's death.
- **Raising awareness among school staff, social workers, NGO practitioners, local and religious leaders about the mixture of feelings that children and adults may experience and that painful feelings** may persist in the long term, beyond the immediate aftermath of a relative's death.
- **Providing access to school staff for students to talk to** and ask for advice or developing peer mentoring schemes for young people who have experienced a death. This would help to provide a more supportive school environment that builds young people's resilience.



- **Increasing the availability of school and university bursaries for students whose relative has died** would also help to improve bereaved young people's educational attendance and attainment.

Participants in Senegal ranked as their number one recommendation the need to adjust the criteria of cash transfer and other social protection programmes to include bereaved children and adults with young children. It is not only the death of a head of household which impacts on children's and families' lives; the death of a mother, sibling or other relative, including those who are not co-resident within the household, but play important roles within the family, can lead to poverty and major emotional and social upheavals and disruptions for different family members.

Developing a more supportive social environment for young people who have experienced a relative's death would be an important step forward in making policy and programming more **'bereavement aware'**. This could help to improve young people's psychosocial wellbeing, care and support and thereby address a range of development goals which are central to the 2030 Agenda.

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For more information

The findings reported here are discussed in full in the research report (available to download in English and French): Evans, R., Ribbens McCarthy, J., Bowlby, S., Wouango, J. and Kébé, F. (2016) [Responses to Death, Care and Family Relations in Urban Senegal](#). Research Report 1, Human Geography Research Cluster, University of Reading.

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