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**Whose household? The fuzziness of a  
critical concept in household surveys**

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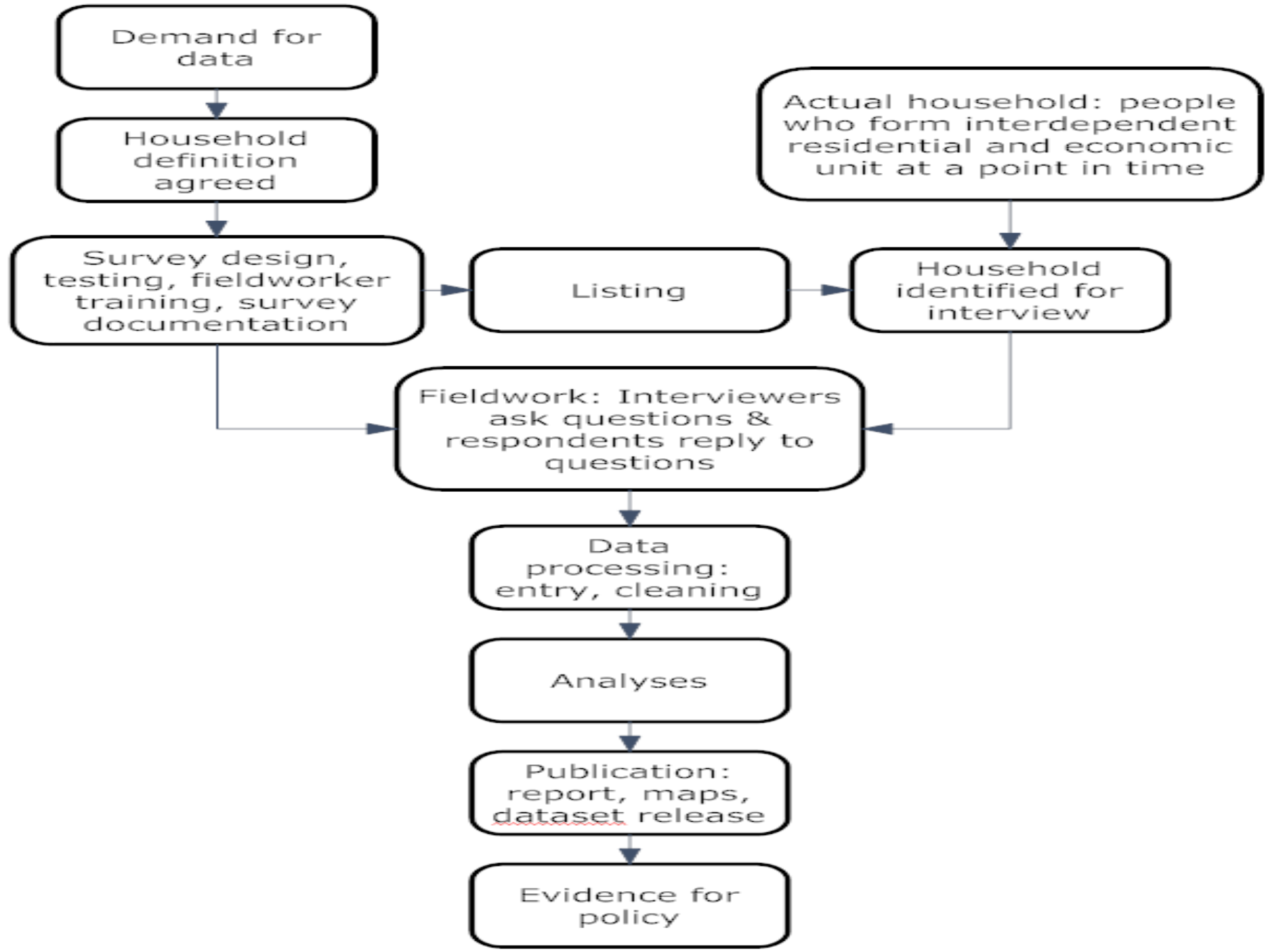
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# The household in household surveys

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# Household surveys in developing countries

- Essential sources of individual-level data for policy planning in low resource settings with poor administrative systems
- Much more standardised
- Little development over time
- Emphasis on comparability across time and space

# Household definitions

- Usually based on combinations of
  - Eat
  - Sleep
  - Sharing of economic livelihoods
- E.g. Tanzania DHS definition: *“a household is defined as a person or group of persons, related or unrelated who live together and share a common source of food”*

## Research Questions

1. In what ways, and to what extent, do household surveys misrepresent peoples' living arrangements?
2. How are estimates of socio-demographic indicators affected by the definition of the household?
3. How might analyses and collection of data from household surveys better represent the realities of peoples' living arrangements? (alas how can we exploit the current data in order to identify household realities)

# Do household definitions matter?

- More variables being added in ‘household section’
  - Way of measuring wealth / poverty / access to facilities which influence health
  - New level of analysis / explanation
- More use (researchers & policy makers) made of publicly available data
- Recognition of importance of society’s basic unit as influence upon members’ well-being
- Increasing use of ‘indicators’ based on household data (e.g. MDGs, asset indicators)
- Increasing importance of poverty mapping - uses household level data

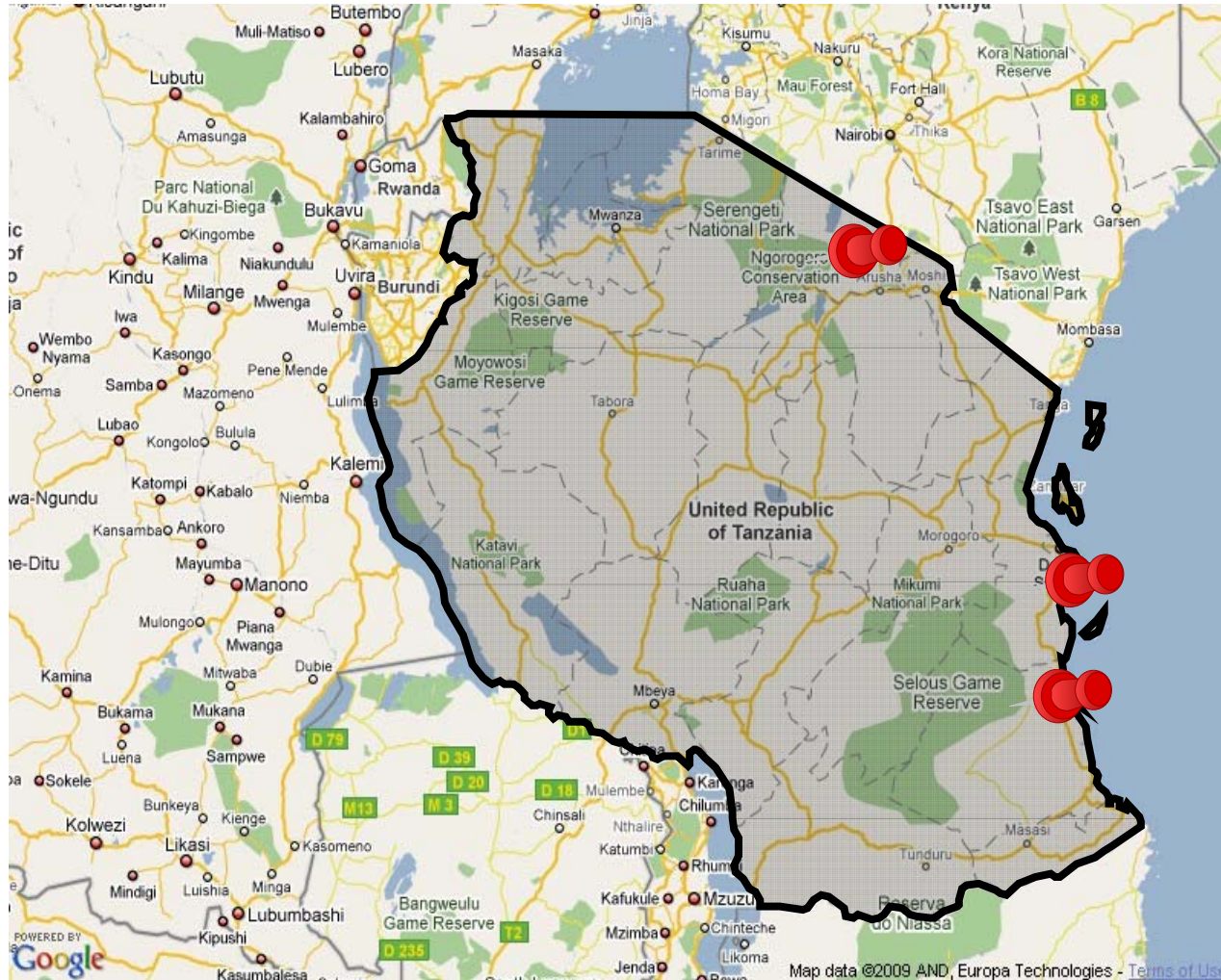
**LESS METHODOLOGICAL WORK BEING DONE**

# Methods

- Interdisciplinary
  - Demography
  - Anthropology
  - Statistics
- Multi-method
  1. Key informant interviews
  2. Case study households
  3. Document review: post-1950
  4. Statistical scenarios
  5. Systematic literature mapping



# Case study: Tanzania



**For analysts and statisticians, the household is the “statistical” household (van de Walle 2006).**

“you clarify that household, those people who live in it together and you explain the definition of the household and so they [survey respondents] get to understand and then you can go on.”

**Senior Manager, Tanzania National Bureau of  
Statistics**

- Aware of tensions but adherence to survey protocols is paramount:

“I mean basically it’s a group of people who live together and make common provision for food and that’s it, that’s our basic definition and we do not try to deviate from that and I don’t even know situations where there has been much deviation from that definition. But that is explained in our interviewers manual and supervisor’s manual so that everyone knows what the standard definition is.”

**Demographer, International survey organisation**

## **Problematic dimensions:**

1. Household versus family versus physical house
2. Multiple dimensions of residence, eating, sleeping, sharing of economic resources and responsibilities
3. The household head
4. Children and older people
5. Mobile young men
6. Specific sub-populations within countries

# 1: Household versus family versus physical house

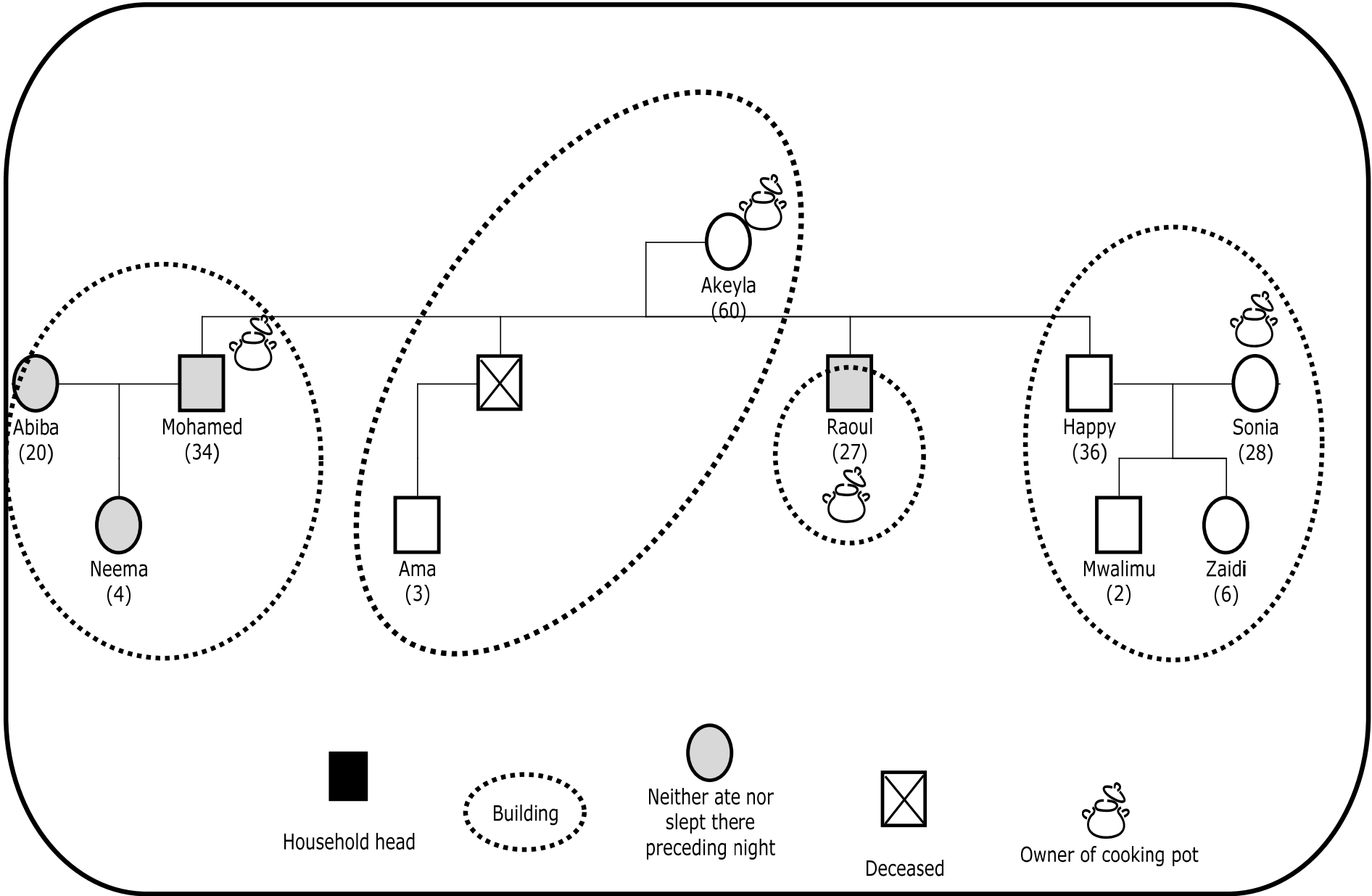
- Highly ambiguous concept
  - survey professionals
  - survey respondents

- I We've been told different words for household...would you ever use *kaya*?
- R *Kaya*? Oh yes. *Nyumba* [=house], *kaya*, that is the household, *kaya*....
- I So who does not know *kaya*?
- R Some people, other people, they do not know *kaya*.
- I ...when you say that they don't know *kaya* is that because *kaya* is a very special word or just educated people know it?
- R Not used sometimes, they use *nyumba* [=house]
- I Would people or interviewers like you, would they ever use *familia*?
- R *Familia*, yes.
- I They would use that as well? OK, when you are trying to make people understand
- R *Familia ya kaya*
- I *Familia ya kaya* - family of this household. OK.

## **2: Multiple dimensions of residence, eating, sleeping, sharing of economic resources and responsibilities**

“But looking at it more critically you find that it [*the cooking pot definition*] doesn't tell the actual reality, how should household look like maybe especially in urban settings.”

**Survey Manager, Tanzania National Bureau of  
Statistics**





### 3: The household head

- Headship is a common dimension of survey data collection.
- Household rosters generally start with household head, and many African surveys include “answer to a common head” as part of a household definition

“But the aim of the head to our definition is not to give them power, it’s just to identify them when we come back. Who do we trust? So that’s the whole aim of the head... It’s just a reference point.”

**NBS statistician and supervisor**

## Household headship as an arbitrary signifier.

Eliya and Simon are students who have shared a room, the rent and bills in Dar Es Salaam for two years.

Each gets his income from government bursaries, supplemented by their parents.

They never cook together but often eat together in a restaurant – each paying for his own food.

There is no concept of household head between them.

In a household survey these two, despite their lack of common cooking pot or common economic enterprise, would probably be treated as a single household with Eliya as head because he signed the lease.

## 4: Children and older people

Paul and his wife rent one room in a 6 room renting house in Dar Es Salaam with their two daughters (Mary – 15 years and Nina – 12 years).

The previous night Mary had neither eaten nor slept with her parents and sister.

Every weekend she travels to her aunt's house elsewhere in Dar Es Salaam.

Mary is a secondary school student and her aunt is a teacher and has a house with electricity, so Maria can study at weekends. The aunt pays for Mary's upkeep at weekends.

A *de facto* household definition would have recorded a three person household based on either sleeping or eating the previous evening, excluding Mary.

## 5: Mobile young men

- Multiple livelihoods are a risk reducing strategy undertaken by many young men in sub-Saharan settings with high levels of under- and unemployment outside subsistence agriculture.
- “the transient nature of youth is left out in almost all of them [household surveys]”
- Expatriate advisor to Tanzanian government

Name	Age	Relationship	Ate here last night	Slept here last night	Notes
Papasasi	15	Son of HHH + 1 <sup>st</sup> wife	No	No	Away for 3 nights to herd cattle from the family herd. Not known for how long he will be away
Loshipai	17	Son of HHH + 1 <sup>st</sup> wife	No	No	Has been working as a trader in for 3 months. Brings all money back to his father
Lemomo	24	Son of HHH + 3 <sup>rd</sup> wife	Yes	Yes	Frequently absent from the household to do casual work (guarding, building fences) in Arusha. Currently between jobs.
Kende	26	Son of HHH + 4 <sup>th</sup> wife	No	No	Has been working in Arusha for 2 months. On average, spends more time in Longido than elsewhere.

## 6: Sub-populations - pastoralists and polygynists

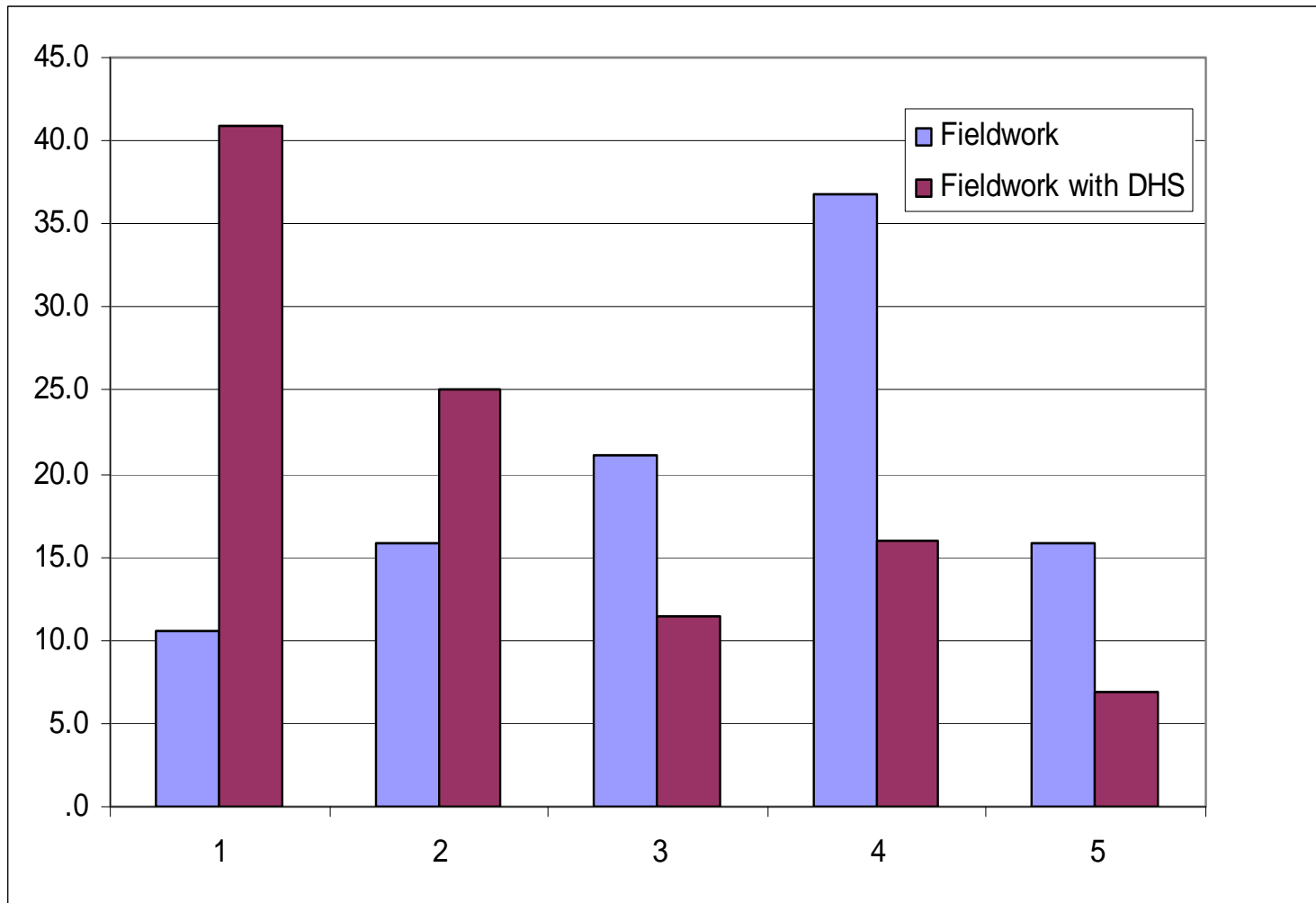
“We just said, OK, we’re going to look at one unit: head of household, primary spouse, primary unit of children. So it’s going to be, not, if there are two sets of wives and two sets of kids we’re not going to sample the second set – because in Tanzania it could be common – so it’s really the male head of household along with the first wife, the oldest wife or whoever he’s living with at that time, and the kids of that union or marriage.”

**NGO senior personnel planning baseline survey**

# Modelling definition differences

- Based on fieldwork we reconstructed households to assess whether individuals would be included in
  - DHS household definition
  - Census household definition
- Created socio-demographic indicators
  - Dependency ratio
  - Sex ratio
  - % female headed household
  - Household size
  - Head of Household education level
  - Wealth asset index

# Impact on asset index:





# Modelling scenarios

- The Tanzanian statistical definition of household reduces the average household size
- Increases the proportion of female headed HHs
- Distorts the characteristics of household heads
- Disassociates people from resources to which they have access
- Single person households often linked to other households

Survey professionals have clear reasons for use of a ‘statistical household’ but subsequent reduction to ‘household’ in reports and ‘household-level analysis’ means that data users assume that these units are the meaningful socio-economic and residential units of the population

Statistical households misrepresent many domestic situations and many people consider themselves to be members of two or more such units despite the unacceptability of dual membership for most household surveys.

The tendency of international and national data users to interpret reports on household data as representing fundamental units of Tanzanian society, without reflecting on what is meant by “household

## *At the data collection stage*

- Collect data in ways that allow multiple configurations
  - include information on who slept there the night before, who ate and possibly on contributions to the household economy
  - Line numbers and relationship to each other
- Where possible and in particular for specialized surveys avoid assumptions of crisp boundaries – allow multiple membership of HHs and find ways to record it.

## *At the data analysis stage*

- Education of users: more background material on the issues surrounding the impact of the household definition
  - Careful interpretation of the results
  - Non-technical language to educate policy makers on the interpretation of the data
- Methodological material available to users
  - Warnings from users' manuals

**Project website:**

**[www.householdsurvey.info](http://www.householdsurvey.info)**

**Article:**

**Randall, S., E. Coast & T. Leone (*in press*)**

**"Whose household? Cultural constructions of a critical concept". *Population Studies***

## Coming next.....

### **Harmonised households : the implications of standardised data tools for understanding intergenerational relations**

**Aim:** To understand the implications of harmonizing definitions of the 'household' for survey and census data to represent the realities of intergenerational relationships in Anglophone and Francophone settings in Europe and Africa.

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