

**L'enfant et ses proches.**  
**Dynamiques familiales en Afrique Subsaharienne**  
*Children and family dynamics in sub-Saharan Africa*

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Institut national d'études démographiques (Ined)  
133, boulevard Davout, 75020 Paris

**Do father matter? Paternal absence and child health in northern Tanzania /**  
*Est-ce que le père compte ? L'absence du père et la santé des enfants dans le Nord de la Tanzanie*

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La présence de la mère et du père : quels enjeux pour les enfants ?  
*The presence of mothers and fathers: to what extent do they matter for children?*



# Do Fathers Matter? Paternal Absence and Child Health in Northern Tanzania

Presented by Anushé Hassan

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# The role of fathers can vary



- Importance of fathers and kin varies across cultures, influencing the impact they have on children's health
- Children growing up without fathers have been seen to be very similar to those who grow up with fathers
- Possibly due to father care being seen as replaceable in some populations (Sear and Mace 2008)



# However...

- Research has largely focused on paternal death and child mortality, which are extreme and rare outcomes
- There is a need to study more nuanced forms of father absence as well as child health, not only death



# We wanted to focus on:

- Ecologically and culturally context-specific research
- Exploring links between living circumstances and children's health outcomes
- Whereabouts of the child's father
- Child health measured by anthropometrics



# Father absence common in SSA

- 1 in 10 under-15 children have lost at least one parent
- 1 in 6 households cares for a child with a dead parent
- Fostering is very common, even when both parents alive

## Tanzania

- In Rufigi, 40% of children had an 'absent father' by age 10
- 31% under-15 children didn't live with biological father, DHS 1996
- Paternal death relatively low: 6% children, DHS 1996



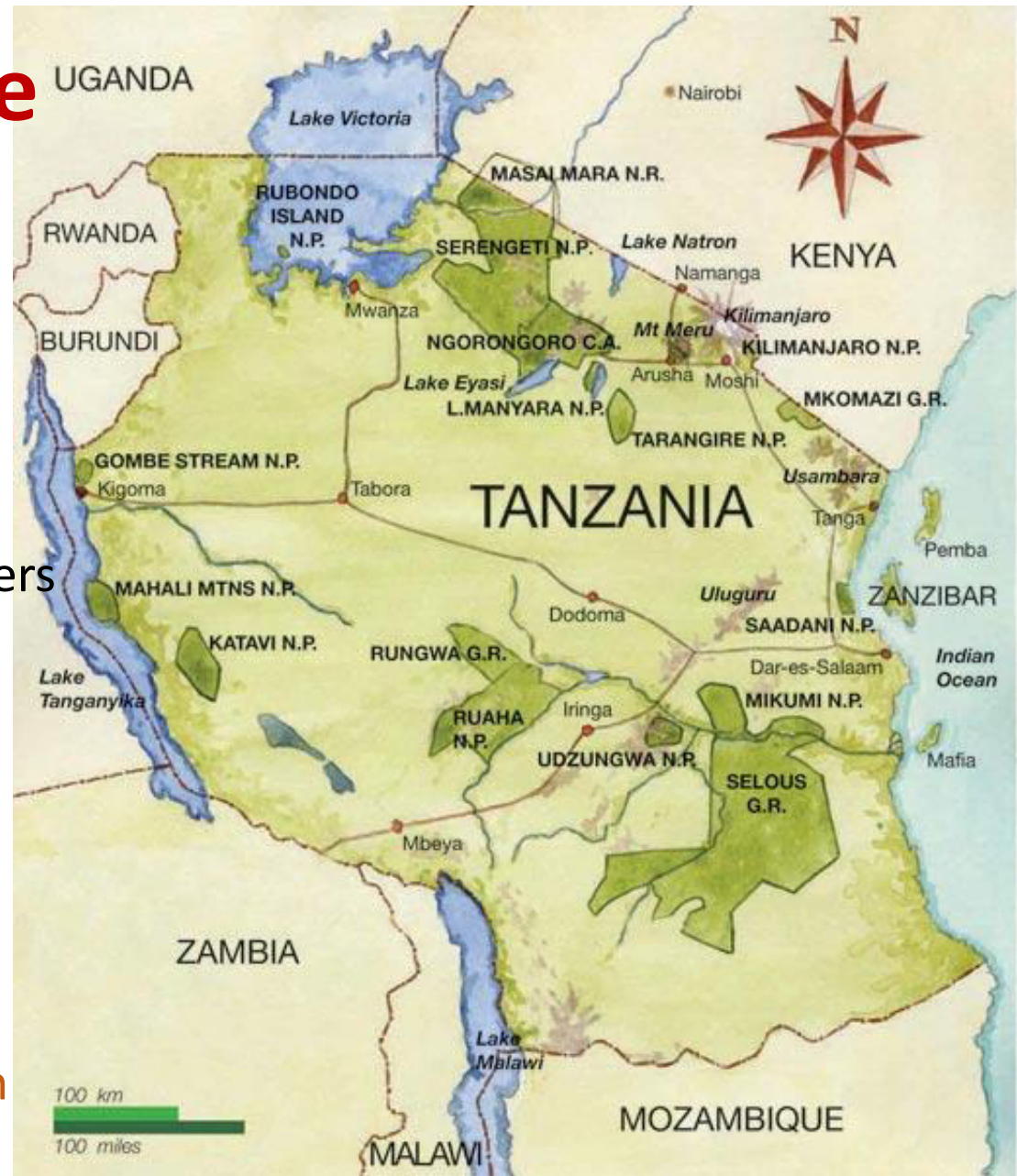
# Some reasons behind father absence

- Death of father
- Labour migration
- Polygynous marriage
- Parents divorced/separated, residing with mother
- Child being fostered (while both parents alive) due to various circumstances
- Predictions regarding direction of effect on child health dependent on context of absence



# Family structure

- Increase in **marital dissolution**
- Rising **age at marriage**
- Increase in **extra-marital births**, residing with mothers
- Fathers residing with first wife in **polygynous unions**
- Child **fostering** is very common
- Domestic labour **migration** (not very common)





# Research Aims

1. Describe the different forms of father absence in this northern-Tanzanian population
2. Measure the frequency of father absence
3. Examine the relationship of father absence with child health, and explore two pathways this could take:
  - Household food security
  - Household wealth



# Data: Savannas Forever Tanzania

An NGO based in  
Arusha, Tanzania



**SAVANNAS FOREVER**  
**TANZANIA**  
DATA FOR AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT



Household Interview in Maasai Village

## Accounted for

- Spatial clustering
- Ethnic variation
- Hierarchy of residence

Trade off: not nationally  
representative

LONDON  
SCHOOL of  
HYGIENE  
& TROPICAL  
MEDICINE



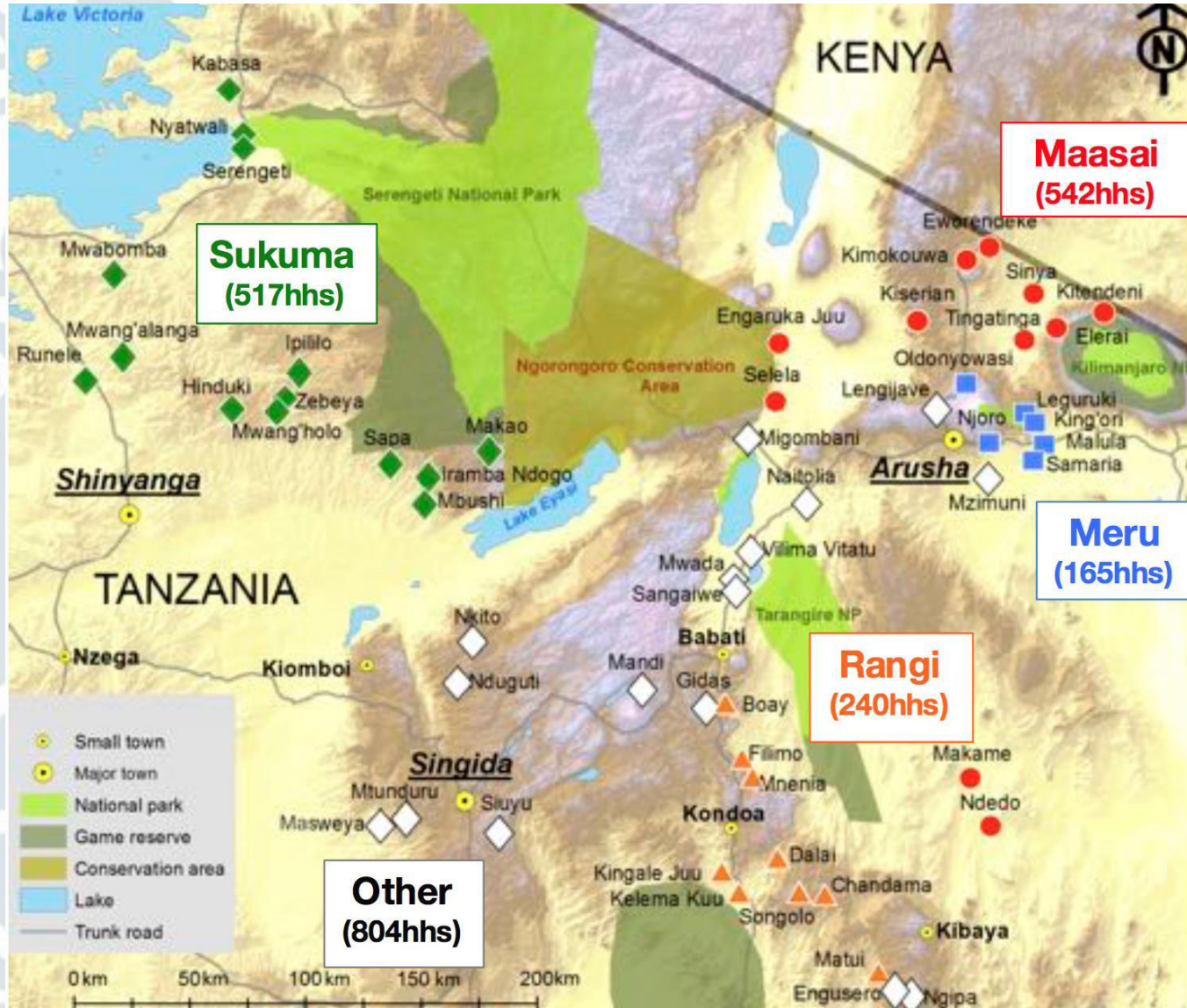
# Whole Village Project 2009-11



Total villages: 56  
Households per village: 60-70  
Total households: 3584  
Households with children: 2268  
Total children <5 years: ~3500



# Whole Village Project 2009-11



Main ethnic tribes

Villages:

- Arusha (19)
- Manyara (11)
- Dodoma (7)
- Singida (5)
- Shinyanga (8)
- Mwanza (3)
- Mara (3)

LONDON  
SCHOOL of  
HYGIENE  
& TROPICAL  
MEDICINE



# Data analysis

## Main predictor:

### Father absence or presence

- Child lived with both parents (in an intact family)
- Father of child was dead
- Father was alive but not resident in the household with the child
- The child was fostered (both parents were alive but the child did not reside with them)



# Data analysis

## Outcomes:

### Child's health (anthropometrics)

- Height for Age Z Score (chronic malnutrition) → HAZ
- Weight for Height Z Score (acute malnutrition) → WHZ

### Living conditions

- Food security (Household Food Insecurity Access Scale)
- Wealth status
  - Principal Component Analysis
  - Acres cultivated
  - Livestock units



*Child Anthropometrics*

*Food security?*



# Methods

Multilevel linear regression models, controlling for ethnicity and child & household demographics accordingly

1. HAZ scores
2. WHZ scores
3. Food security
4. Wealth levels

Children with mothers who had died were excluded from the analysis



# Results: 'father absence'

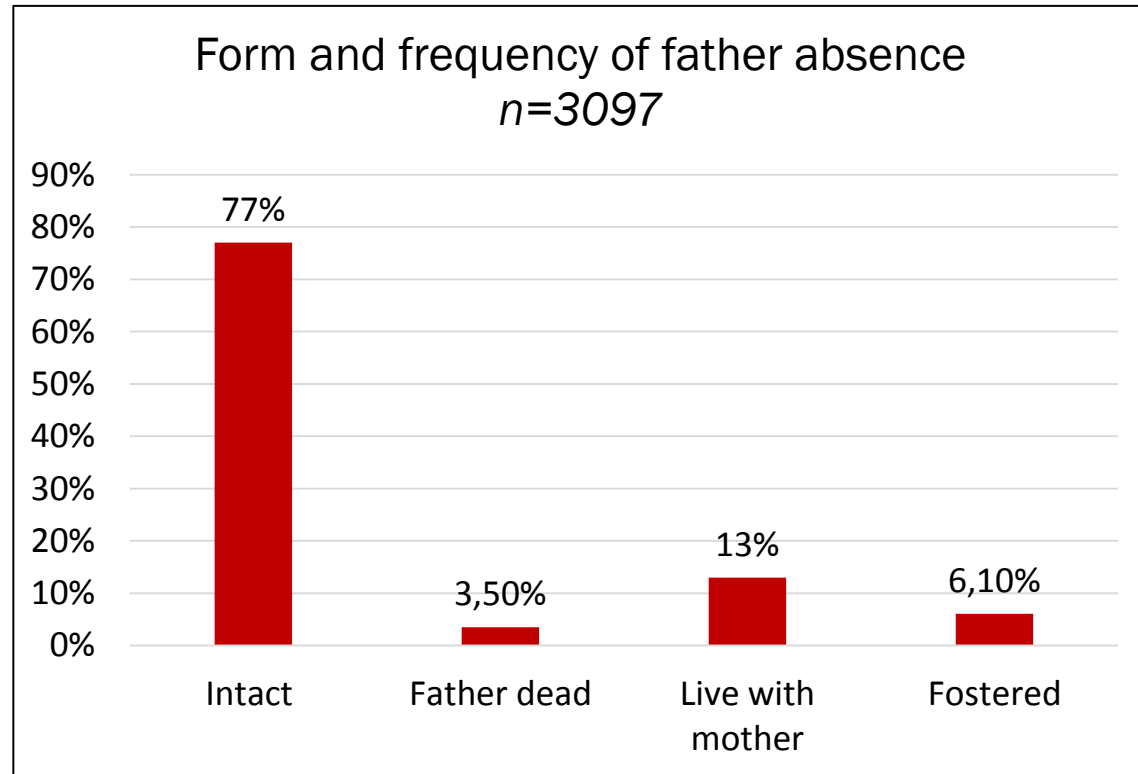
\*Children in intact families, mostly:

- Male-headed, monogamous (73%)
- Primary guardian parent

\*Children who had dead fathers, mostly:

- Lived with mother
- Female-headed, widowed, divorced or separated (64%)
- Primary guardian mother (77%) or grandparents (15%)

\* $p < 0.001$





# Results: 'father absence'

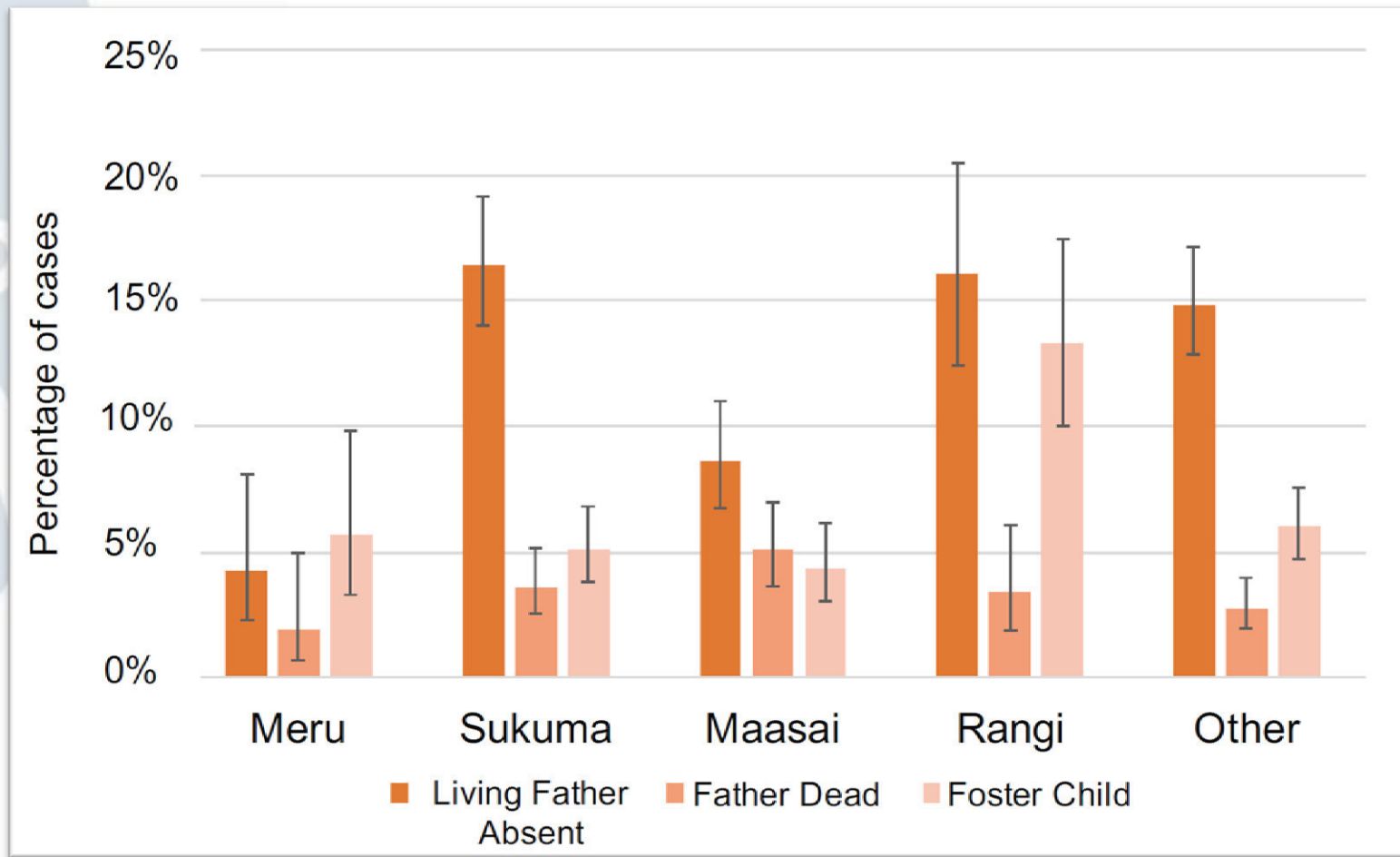
	Father alive but absent %	Child fostered %
Male-headed, monogamous	<b>35</b>	<b>48</b>
Male-headed, polygynous	12	21
Female-headed, widowed, divorced or separated	<b>30</b>	23
Primary guardian, parent(s)	<b>81</b>	1
Primary guardian, grandparents(s)	17	<b>88</b>

- Fostered children most similar to intact families
- No association with sex of child
- Female headed, monogamously married and female headed polygynously married were very low numbers, not shown



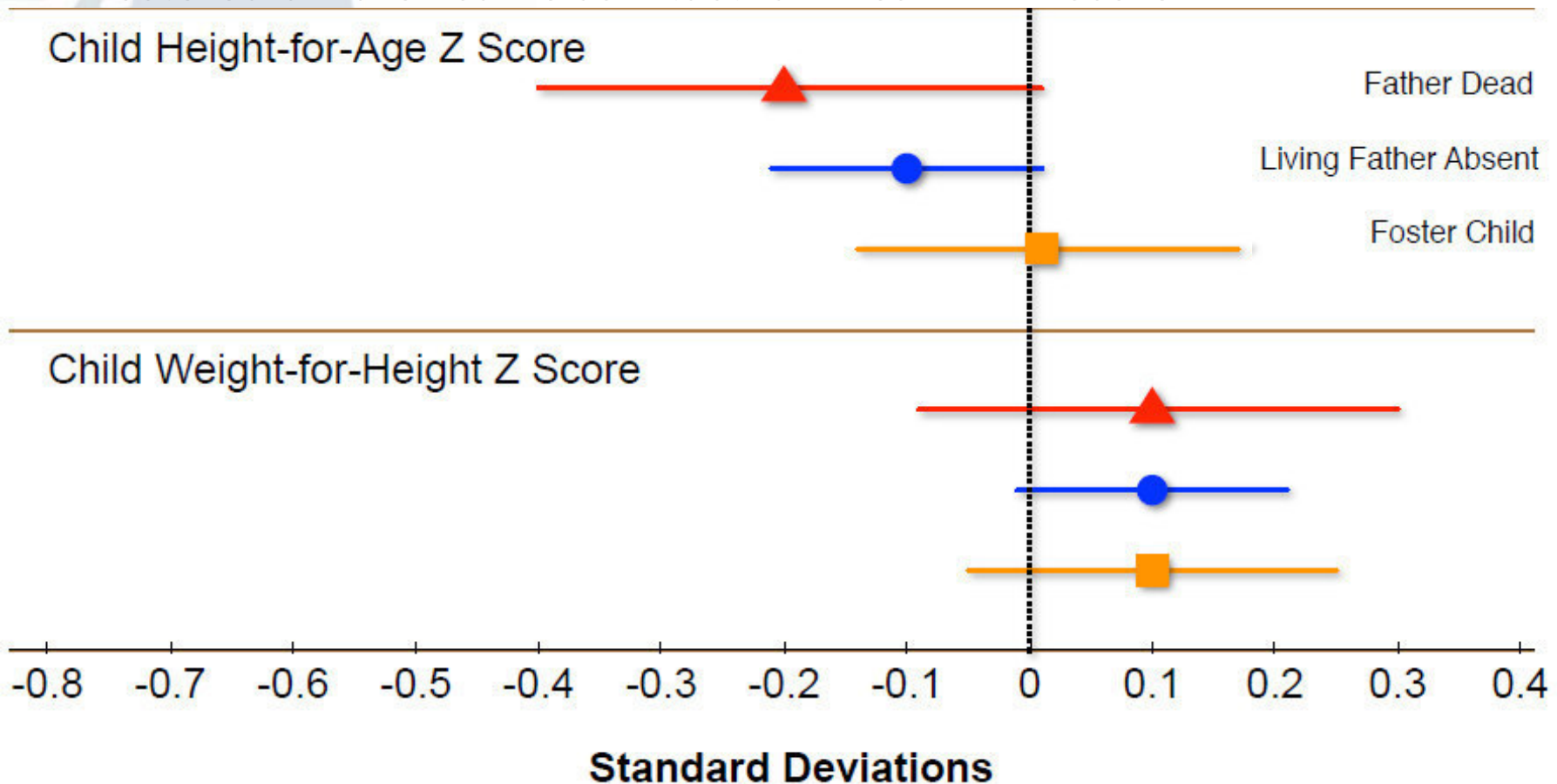
# Ethnic variations

- Meru → lowest percentage of absent fathers
- Rangii → highest number of fostered children
- Maasai → children suffered most from father death



# Results: child health

- Children with fathers who were **alive but absent**, or were **dead** had **lower HAZ scores** than those in intact families
- WHZ did not seem to differ by family circumstance
- Fostered children same as intact families in HAZ score



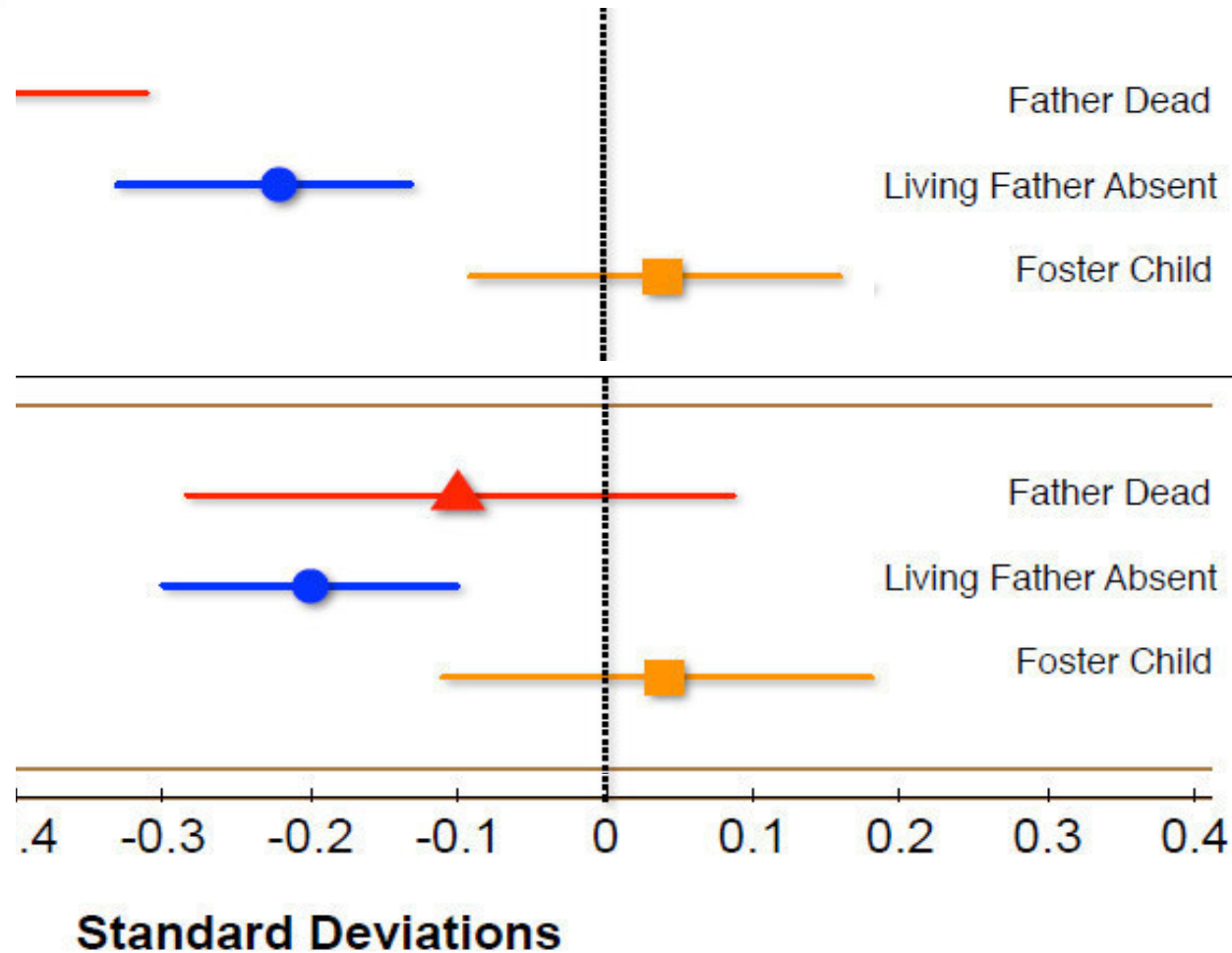
# Results: food security and wealth

## Father alive but absent:

- Lower food security
- Lower wealth
- Less land cultivated, fewer large livestock

## Children with fathers who were dead:

- Lower wealth
- Less land cultivated, fewer large livestock
- Similar food security



Fostered children same as intact families



# Some key findings

- Father absence common, but impact depends on form
- Having a dead father resulted in chronic malnutrition & lower wealth
- Children whose fathers were alive but did not reside with them had poorer health and worse circumstances than those who lived with both parents (resource diversion vs labour migration?)
- Fostering was not associated with HAZ or WHZ scores
- Children who were fostered had similar food security and wealth levels as intact households.
- WHZ scores highest for children from intact families and those with fathers who were alive but did not reside with the child
- Maasai disadvantaged, but own more cattle than herders from other ethnic affiliations, Meru generally advantaged (mirrors previous research, *Lawson et al. 2014*)



# Discussion

- Forms of father absence, compared to paternal mortality
- Children's health and measurement of livelihood as opposed to child mortality
- Absence is context dependent: less consequential in settings where fathers provide less support, or when external factors can influence health more
- Father death more common in poorer households? Causality
- Divorced, extra marital births less likely to get paternal support
- Resource diversion in polygynous households
- In this study however, polygynous households were wealthier, had child health equivalent to or better than monogamous households
- Children being fostered to wealthier households? Or to close kin
- Importance of grandparents as caregivers
- Investments from outside the family?



# Future Work

Continue this research in my  
PhD

**Thank you!**



Child heights & weight measurements

