



# Poverty in African households: the limits of survey representations

Sara Randall,  
Department of Anthropology, UCL

Ernestina Coast  
Department of Social Policy, LSE

Paper presented at ASAUK conference, Leeds 6-8 September 2012



# Poverty in Africa

How is poverty in Africa studied and understood?

– Measuring

- Relative / absolute

– Conceptualising

- Multidimensional / fuzzy

– Levels of poverty

- Individual / household / village / district / national

– Understanding determinants

– Understanding dynamics



# Poverty in Africa

## HOUSEHOLD – key

- Measuring poverty
- Understanding impact of poverty
- Most humans live in domestic groups
  - Support for vulnerable (children / elderly)
- Africa – absence of state support



# Multiple Critiques of concept of household in Africa

Eg: Guyer (1981), Guyer & Peters (1987)

*Economists' concept of household matches poorly onto African economic and social organisation*

## African Households are

- NOT discretely bounded groups: household members draw on different networks and kinship relations to access resources
- NOT fixed forms but constantly evolving
- NOT homogenous: differentiated along gender & generation



## Issues emerging from literature on measuring poverty

- **Data sources**
- **Time perspective on poverty**
- **Reliability of household level data**
  - **one person provides info on the whole group**
    - (a) HOUSEHOLD is entity whose members have similar levels access to resources and assets
    - (b) One person capable of responding for whole unit
  - **Stability of household size over time**
- **Adequate accounting for household size and structure?**
- **Qualitative / quantitative / both?**
- **Wealth ranking?**
  - “Wealth in people”**



## **Critiques of concept of household in Africa**

**Do the ways in which household survey data are collected**

- (a) Give us valid measures of household size and membership
- (b) Mask significant responses to poverty or strategies to avoid / counteract poverty

**Focus here on issues around**

- Household size
- Household membership (multiple membership , fuzzy membership, uncertain membership)
- Interactions with local poverty avoidance and alleviation strategies



# Research Methods

Tanzania, Burkina Faso, Uganda (and Senegal)

**1. Review of definitions** used in household surveys and censuses

- (survey documentation, enumerators manuals)
- for last 50 years
- Includes most Anglophone African countries

**2. Around 50 in-depth interviews with households** in each country

- their perception of their household membership,
- inclusions, exclusions (and why)
- multiple household membership, transitory status, ambiguous membership

**4 sites per country**

capital – long settled, planned district / recently settled spontaneous district

small town (plus rural hinterland)

rural area

# DHS interviewer manual (www.measuredhs.com)

The first step in completing the household schedule is to request a list of all persons who usually live in the household and any visitors. To get a correct listing, you will have to know what we mean by a member of the household and what we mean by a visitor:

Member of the household. A household may be one person or a group of persons who usually live and eat together. This is not the same as a family. A family includes only people who are related, but a household includes any people who live together, whether or not they are related. For example, three unrelated men who live and cook meals together would not be considered one family, but they would be considered to be members of the same household.

Visitor. A visitor is someone who is not a usual member of the household but who stayed in the household the night before the day you are conducting the interview. If an individual stayed in the household the previous night, he or she should be listed on the Household Schedule.

Sometimes, it is not easy to know whom to include in the household and whom to leave out. Here are some examples:

- A woman lists her husband as head of the household, but he lives somewhere else. If he does not usually live in the household you are interviewing, and he did not sleep there the previous night, he should not be included in the listing.
- Sometimes, people eat in one household and sleep in another. Consider the person to be a member of the household where he or she sleeps.
- A person living alone is a household.
- A servant is a member of the household if he or she usually lives in the household.



# Household size and structure

## Self defined households bigger than survey defined

### - polygamous households

Cooking pots don't define autonomous economic units / More matter of tradition  
Often get grain out of same granary / resources from same source

### - absent migrant husbands / young men / young women

seen as integral part of household / make substantial economic contributions

### - absent children at school elsewhere (boarding or lodging with kin)

integral part of household / often absorb considerable resources

### - rural production systems – herding on distant pastures / farming distant fields

part of larger household production and consumption unit

often NEVER co-resident with interviewed household members

Essential part of unit – come and go, draw on same resources / granary / herd etc

### - extended / 3 generation families

may have separate cooking pots for women / practicality and/or tradition

### - lack of space / land acquisition strategies lead to individuals sleeping elsewhere



## Household size, structure and economy

### **Cooking and eating together** (out of one pot)

- does not signify consumption / production unit
- may signify SOME economic / social solidarity

**Women** OFTEN have separate budgets which men do not know details about / cannot report on accurately / cannot access

**Young men / women** – often have some income they manage for themselves and some which is contributed to household

**Children** often receive resources from several households

- contribution to schooling
- support / food & meals

**Elderly people** often receive support / contributions from a number of sources (may be put in general household budget)

**Illegitimate children** mobile between households; receive support from diverse sources



# Multiple household membership

## Children

- **illegitimate children** with mother with father / with mother's kin / with father's kin.  
Often move around (one way of obtaining support from fathers)
- **schooling:** - better school / practical solutions
  - better living conditions and support / - way of richer kin supporting poorer

## Young men

- work related / acquisition of land rights / tradition (maasai) / girlfriends / ?sex?

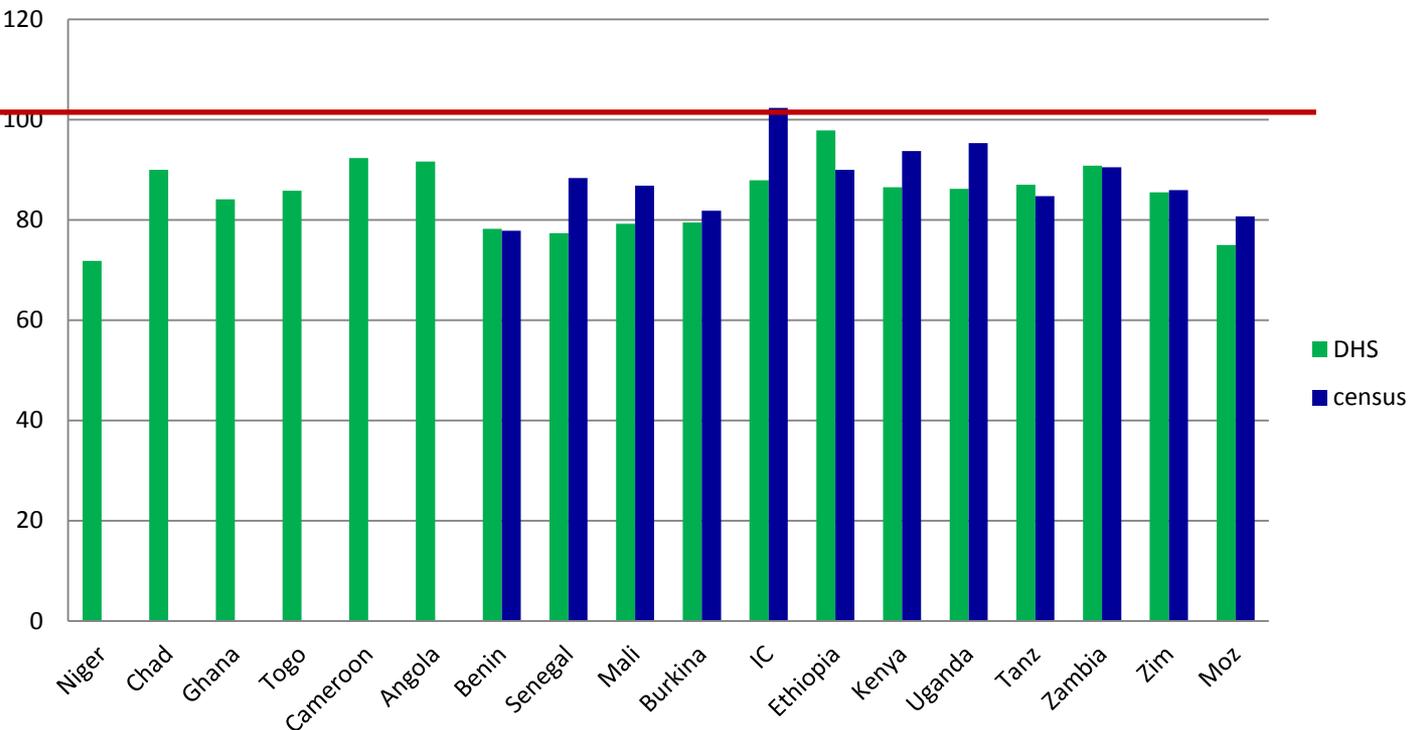
## Young women

- work related – temporary work maids / mining areas /
- kin related – helping out for long periods of time

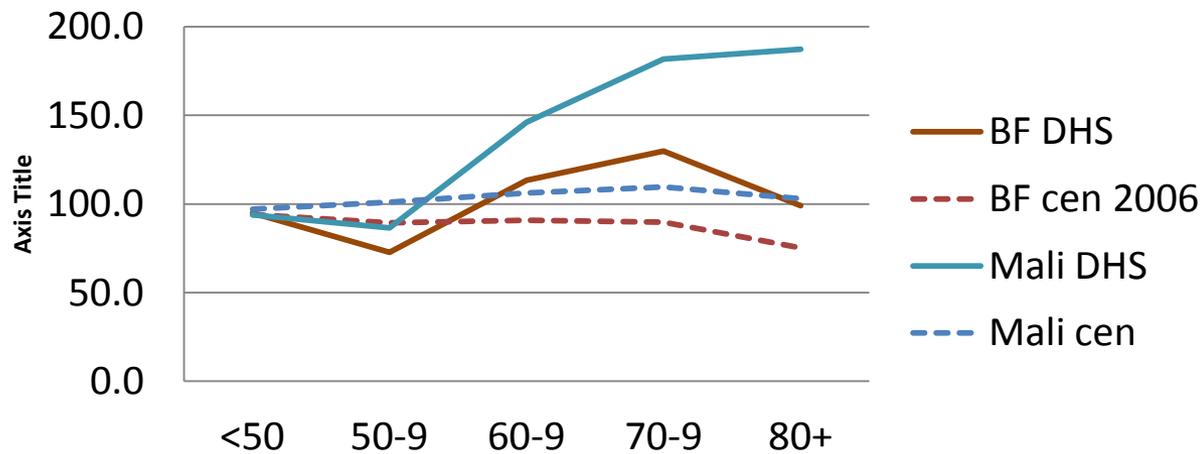
## Elderly people (no longer able to work)

- may move around offspring / other kin
- older women (still active) often go on prolonged visits to daughters to 'help'

## Sex ratios of population aged 18-39: DHS and census



## Sex ratios at older ages: DHS and census data

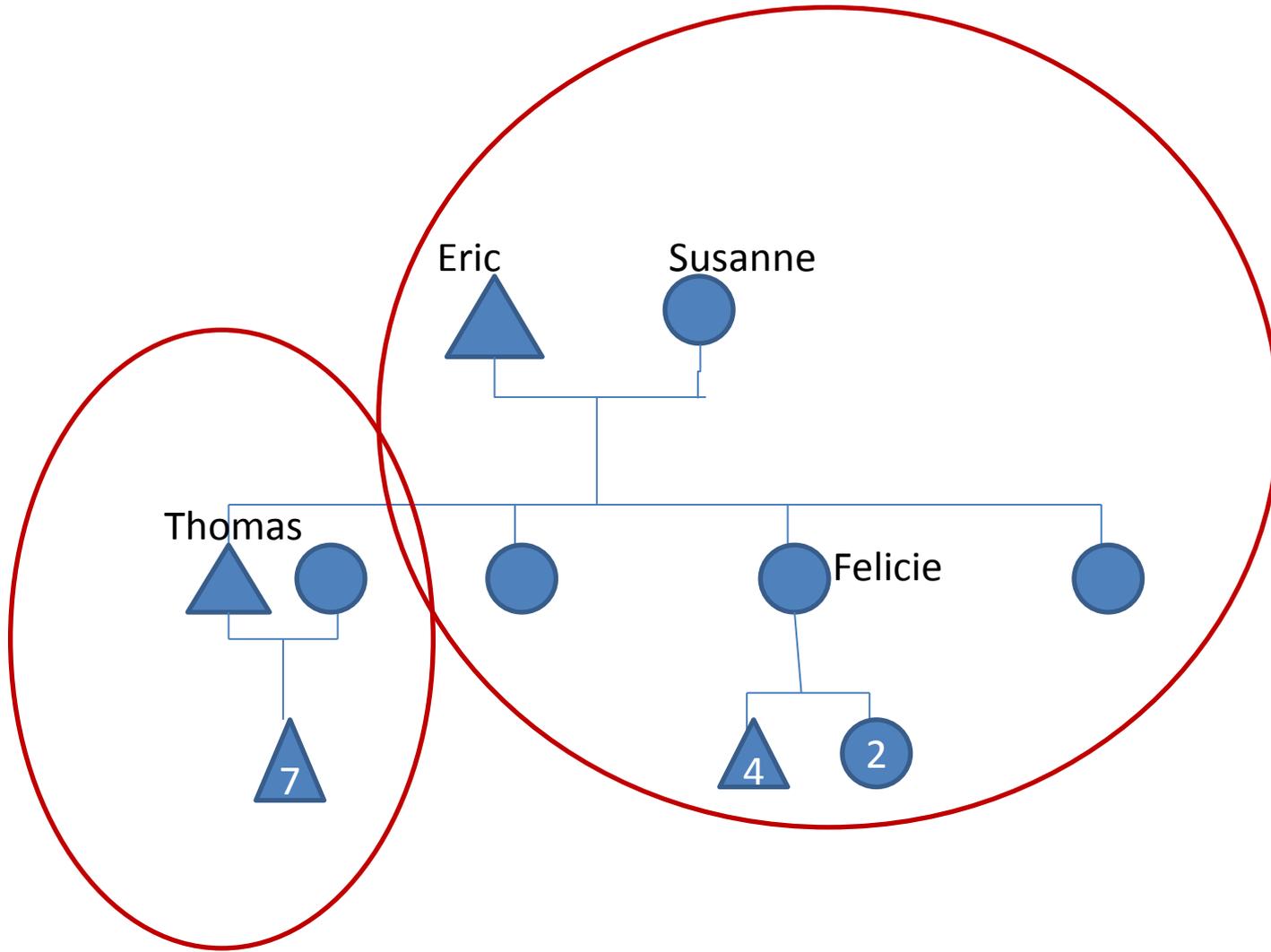


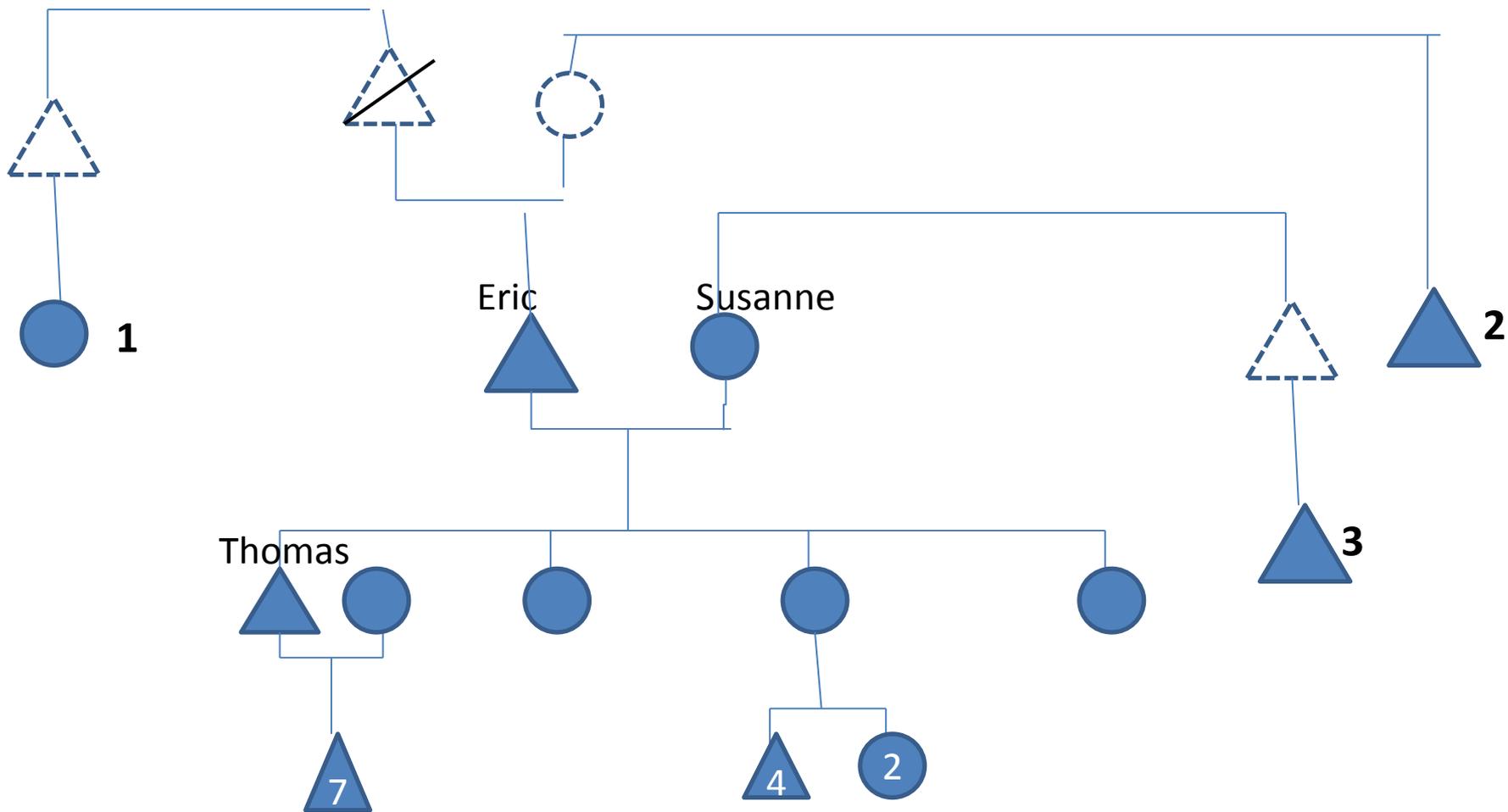


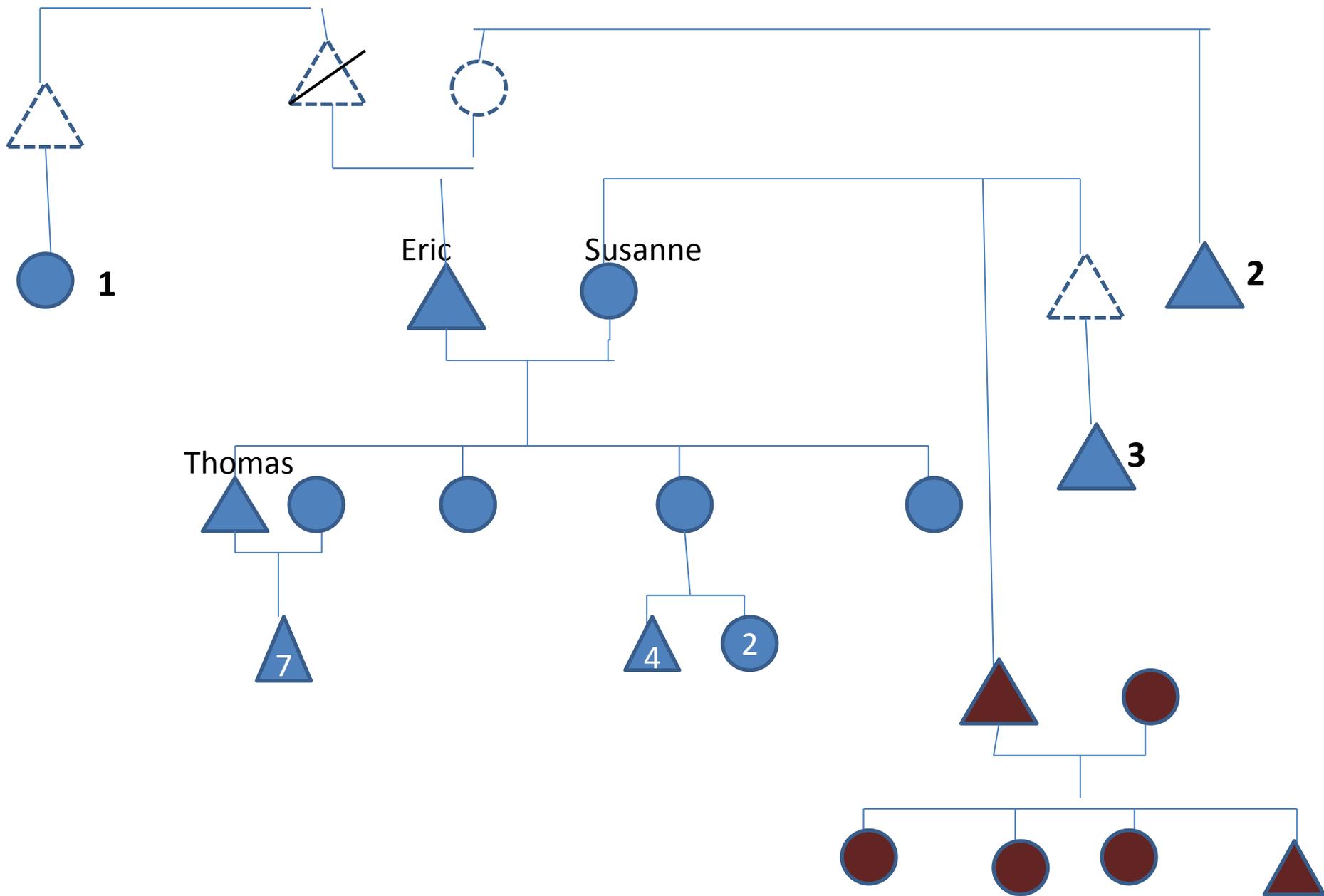
## Closed and open households

- Open households
  - Received non-nuclear household members and provided economic / other support
  - Sent nuclear family members elsewhere where they received economic / other support
  - Sent resources to kin (other than parents / children)
  - Received resources from kin
  - Fluctuating household membership
  - Household members also attached to other households

# Ouagadougou





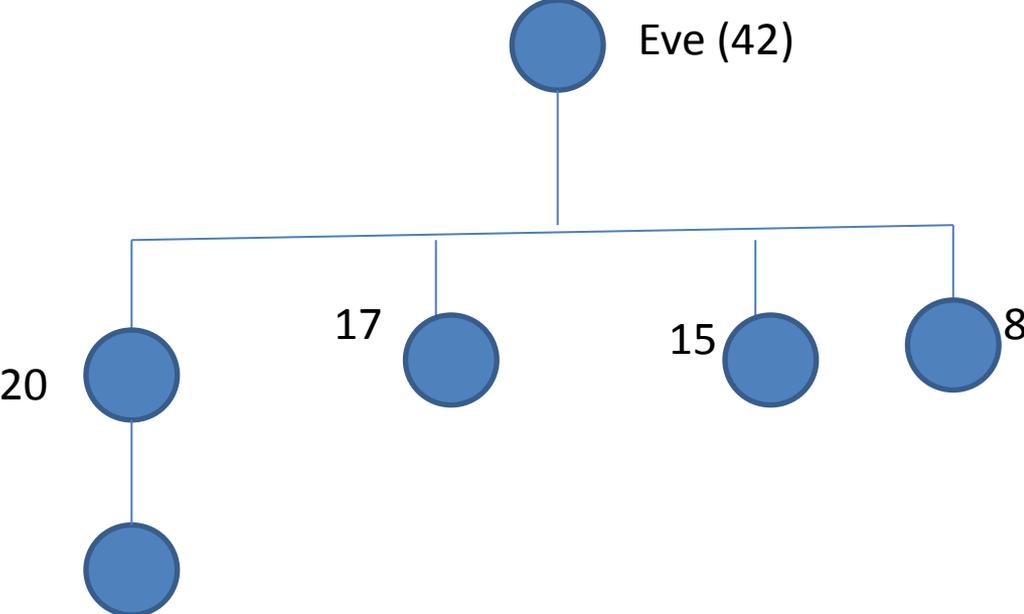




## Closed and open households

- Closed households
  - Just made up of those related within nuclear family (can still include 3 generation / extended)
  - No reported movements of people in or out
  - Household members do not have potential membership of other households
  - Few reciprocal links of support with other households or kin
  - Often said there is no-one outside nuclear family who they could call on for help in crisis

Dar Es Salaam – informal quarter





# Significance of closed and open households

## Closed households

- Generally well represented by survey data
- Including poverty / wealth
- Few shared resources
- Clear and relatively stable household membership

## Exceptions to good representation depend on survey household definitions

- large multi-generation / polygamous / extended households where the definition splits them up
- Key household members are absent on labour migration



# Significance of closed and open households

## Open households

- Poorly represented by survey data
- Difficult to evaluate poverty / wealth because much security may be extra-household
- Unstable and ambiguous household membership

**survey household definitions highly problematic**

## Key issue:

open because **'wealth-in-people'** important part of strategies for security and avoiding poverty



## Wealth-in-people

- Remains an important poverty avoidance strategy
- Highlighted by many mixed methods, longitudinal studies of African poverty

### **poverty**

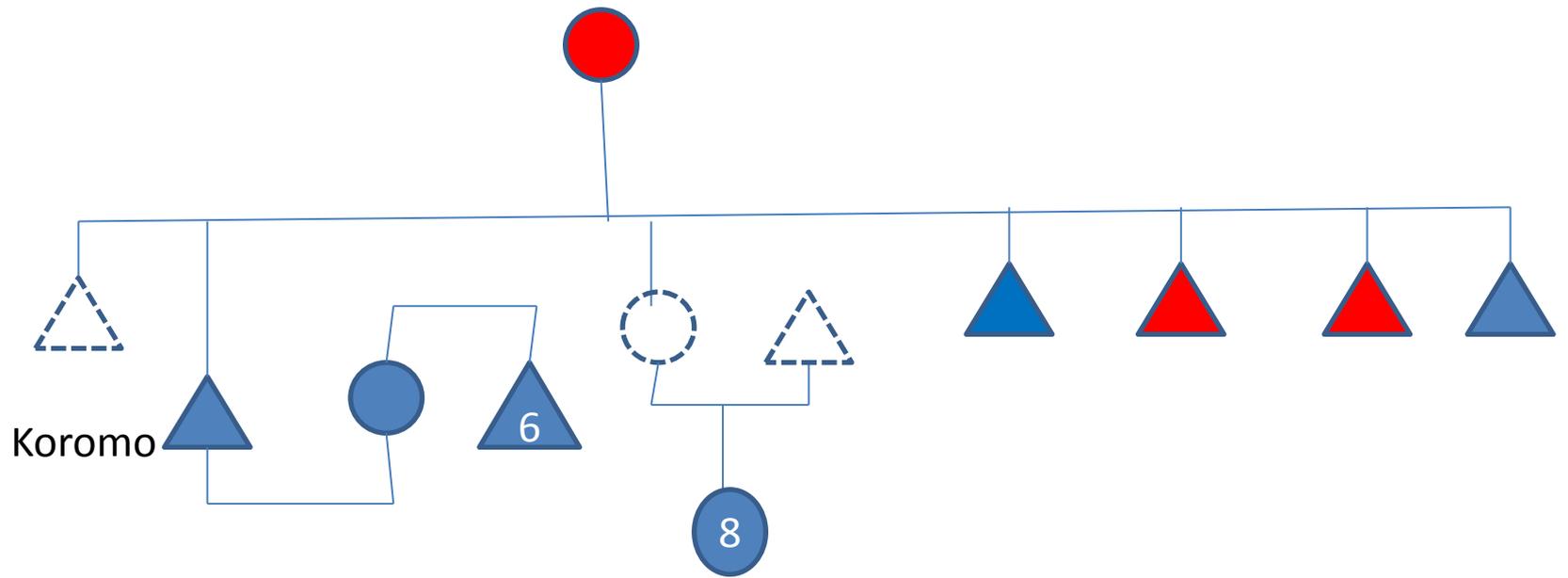
- lacking good networks
- conventional support networks have been excised  
eg. orphans / widows / divorcees / elderly with no surviving children



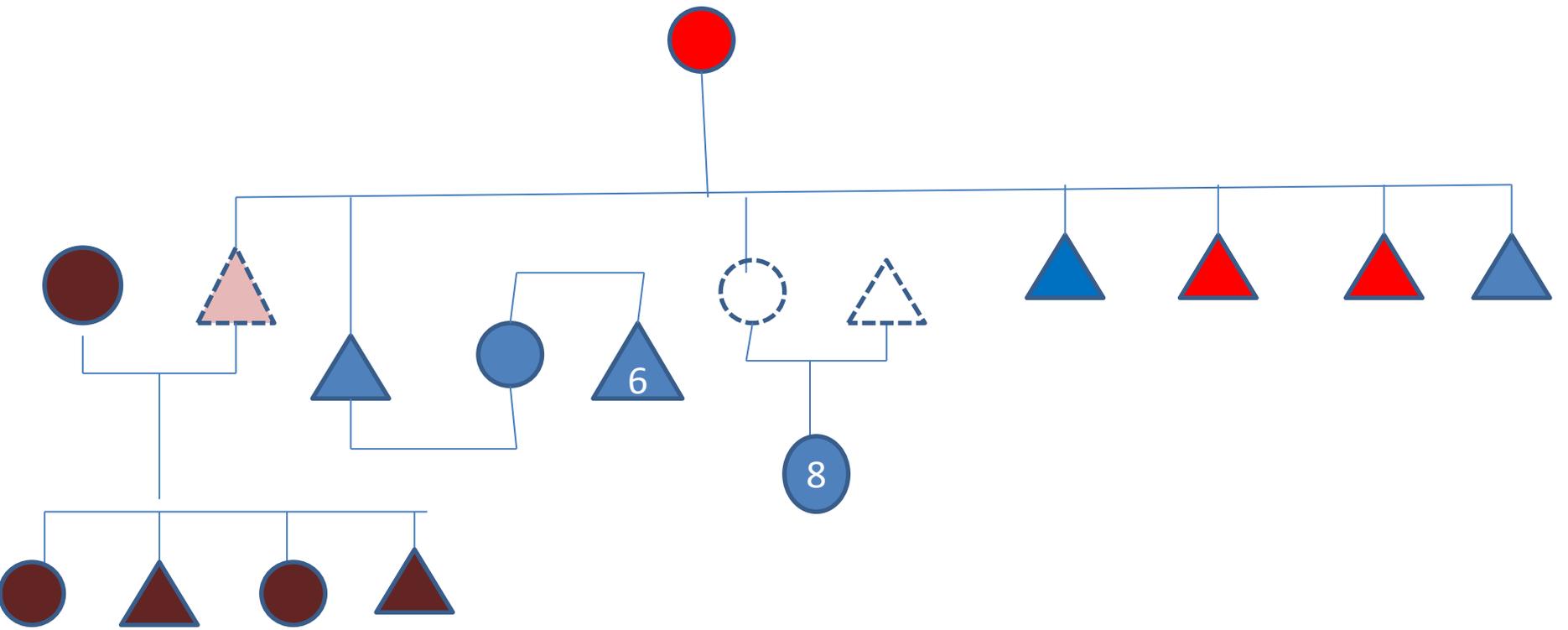
## Wealth-in-people

1. Maasai *olmarei* (best term for emic household)
  - organised along patrilineal principles
  - may split if conflict / too big / other reasons
  - married daughters join husband's *olmarei*
    - where their children belong

Daughters and poor husbands join HER father's *olmarei*



  Absent  
  Present





## Wealth-in-people

### 3. Rufiji (rural Tanzania farmers/fishers)

Two households

1. oldish couple, their divorced daughter and her daughter, the wife's 90 year old mother, her niece with her 4 children
2. nuclear family with 6 children aged 3-19: the father is the son of the elderly couple in 1.

*“ we each have our own kaya, we eat on our own. But when times are bad and we are all hungry, and there is no food at the shamba we will eat together, one day one cooks from their stores, the next day the other from their stores – and not just once but for months at a time”*



## Discussion

Problems measuring poverty using cross-sectional household surveys

1. Arise from minimalist **definitions** of household
2. Arise from **key solutions to poverty** in much of Africa symbolised by **‘wealth-in-people’**
  - mobility / flexibility of household membership
  - extra household support links
  - temporary absorption / joining together of household under stress

Closed households (no longer / not subscribing to / participating in ‘wealth-in-people’) probably those best represented by household surveys



## **Acknowledgements**

ESRC and ANR – funders of HH-MM research

Other team members of HH-MM, especially

Natacha Compaore

Beth Bishop, Ernest Ndakaru, Marie-Annick Moreau  
for help with Tanzanian field data collection



